



Re-Constructing Identities: History, Trauma and Healing in the Post-Colonial Narrative

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RE-CONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES: HISTORY, TRAUMA AND HEALING
IN THE POST-COLONIAL NARRATIVE

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By

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This dissertation essays to fill a gap that exists currently in postcolonial theory and criticism: that constituted by the dearth, if not total absence, of a psychological approach. Long before postcolonial studies became a discipline, Frantz Fanon declared that “only a psychoanalytical interpretation of the black problem can lay bare the anomalies of affect that are responsible for the structure of the complex.” Fanon would later emerge as a canonical figure in the field, even spawning an academic cottage industry memorably dubbed “critical Fanonism.” But much of this criticism ignores the essence of Fanon’s call for a sociodiagnostic, a psychoanalytic interpretive tool informed by social and economic realities. My intervention seeks to answer the question of what it would mean to read post-colonial history as the history of a trauma, of the subversive return of the repressed.

Yet, to speak of psychic epiphenomena and social realism in one breath presents, admittedly, an apparent contradiction. To show this problem as more apparent than real, I bring psychoanalysis into dialogue with philosophical realism. I look to the emergent theory of

post-positivist realism for a conception of reference that provides the referential link between “traumatic” and “ordinary” experience.

In my readings of the primary texts that form this study, I show the link between the traumatic wound of (post)colonialism and the strange and often bizarre effects it produces even today. Thus, for instance, I expand our current understanding of the confounding drama of death and continuity in a colonized world recently voided of its will (Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*), and of the debilitating symptoms of a repressed past that must be worked-through in order to recover agency (Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*). My exegesis serves as a critique of the tendency in postcolonial studies to privilege only the cultural-political mode of interpretation, thereby leaving a crucial dimension of the postcolonial predicament inadequately explored.

If asked to restate the goal of this dissertation, I would, for want of a better term, say simply, “Towards a psycho-social realist theory of the post-colonial narrative.” It is a close cousin of “the political unconscious,” the closest that a materialist attempt at probing the repressed strata of postcolonial trauma has yet come.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ogagaoghene Emerotowho Ifowodo was born in Oleh, Delta State, Nigeria. He received an LL.B (Honours) from the University of Benin in 1989. He worked briefly as an attorney and then for eight years as a rights activist with Nigeria's premier non-governmental rights group, the Civil Liberties Organisation. Ifowodo began writing poetry in secondary school where his first poem won first prize in an annual inter-house art festival. In 2003 he received an M.F.A. from Cornell. Prior to that, he had published a prize-winning collection, *Homeland and Other Poems* (reissued in 2008 by Africa World Press, Trenton, NJ). His second volume, *Madiba*, completed before he entered Cornell in 2001, was published in 2003. Ifowodo's third book, *The Oil Lamp*, is an autonomous part of his M.F.A. thesis and was published in 2005. A fourth collection, *A Good Mourning*, is near completion. Ifowodo's poetry has appeared in several anthologies, including *Step Into a World: A Global Anthology of the New Black Literature* (John Wiley, 2000); *Voices from all Over: Poems with Notes and Activities* (Oxford University Press, 2006); *Like a Fragile Index of the World: Poems for David Skorton* commemorating the installation of Cornell's twelfth president; *25 Nigerian Poets* (Ishmael Reed, 2000); *Dance the Guns to Silence: 100 Poems for Ken Saro-Wiwa* (Flipped Eye, 2005), and in the following magazines, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Poetry International*, *Atlanta Review*, *English in Africa*, *Mantis*, among others. Ifowodo's poems have been translated into German, Dutch and Romanian. He was held in preventive

detention for six months in 1997-1998 under the military dictatorship of General Abacha. Excerpts from the on-going memoirs of his detention have appeared in *Gathering Seaweed: African Prison Writing* (2002); *NW 14: The Anthology of New Writing* (2006); *Vanguard and African Writing*. Ifowodo is a recipient of the PEN USA Barbara Goldsmith Freedom-to-Write Award and of the New Word Award of Poets of All Nations. He is also an honorary member of the PEN centers of the USA, Canada, and Germany and a fellow of the Iowa Writing Program. Ifowodo enrolled in the Ph.D program at Cornell in 2003 and earned an M.A. in English in 2006. He was awarded an International Institute of Education grant and a Cornell University Provost's Diversity Fellowship towards the completion of his candidacy and the dissertation process. He is currently on the MFA faculty at Texas State University, San Marcos.

DEDICATION

To Alissa,
whose path crossed mine at Cornell,
and to Adigheji and Irorezi
who came after.

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In researching and writing this dissertation, I have benefited tremendously from numerous teachers and mentors, friends and well-wishers, and family members whose intellectual example, thinking, counselling and support helped me come to a better understanding of, and the stamina to complete, this project. But to begin at the very beginning, I should like to thank Professor Wole Soyinka who, in 2000, urged me to think of applying for a Master in Fine Arts (MFA) programme in the United States as a way of gratifying my heart by transiting from law to a relatively more conducive environment for poetry and writing in academia. Soyinka did not stop there but also wrote letters of recommendation for me when I applied a year later to four colleges, leading to my coming to Cornell in the fall of 2001. Professor Biodun Jeyifo (BJ), whose own crucial role in my coming to Cornell I have acknowledged in my last poetry collection, *The Oil Lamp*, deserves to be thanked anew here. At the end of my MFA in 2003, I applied only to Cornell for a Ph.D in English and it is safe to say that Jeyifo was my most influential recommender. Until he left Cornell for Harvard in 2006, BJ's was not only a warm and assuring avuncular presence so far away from our native Nigeria but also a tough and inspiring intelligence that held itself out for emulation.

I must next and very quickly thank my special committee: Satya P. Mohanty, who became co-chair upon BJ's departure for Harvard; Hortense J. Spillers; Roger Gilbert, and Laura Donaldson. I count myself lucky to have had the personal example and the eager direction

and encouragement of my committee members. Two seminars on theory with Satya led me, an outsider with the writer's scepticism for post-fangled theories, towards a different way of talking about literary theory and experience. A seminar with Hortense caused my second encounter with Frantz Fanon, the psychoanalytic Fanon, who would, unbeknownst to me then when I was only a poet in the MFA programme, inspire this dissertation. When it became obvious, due to the 2006 departures of BJ and Hortense for Harvard and Vanderbilt, respectively, that I would need to reconstitute my committee, Satya readily agreed to be co-chair and Roger and Laura, whose respective seminars, Whitman and Twentieth Century American Poetry, and Postcolonial America, I had the privilege of taking, very kindly accepted my invitation. In the course of writing, I accepted a position on the MFA faculty at Texas State University but Roger was the first to urge me to complete the dissertation, having come so far. I should also like to thank Professor Eric Cheyfitz, an original member of the committee, who left early on but not before his rigorous questioning had helped to steer me towards a more fruitful line of inquiry.

Although not a member of my dissertation committee, Ken McClane, who chaired my MFA special committee, gave me constant support and encouragement. And at a critical moment, Dominick LaCapra, whose work is invaluable to this dissertation, graciously answered my queries on some questions of translation of Freud.

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Laura Brown, Fredric Bogel, Tsitsi Jaji, Paola Iovene, Angela Naimou, Akin Adesokan, Yoshiaki Mihara, Bridget Meeds and Kenny Berkowitz, Tejumola Olaniyan, Salah Hassan, Odia Ofeimun, Harry Garuba, Ike Okonta, Obi Nwakanma, E. C. Osondu, Pius Adesanmi, Amatoritsero Ede, Maik Nwosu, Victor Ehikhamenor, Ikhide Ikheloa, Wumi Raji, Kunle Ajibade, the Olorunyomis (Dapo, Ladi and Sola), Peyi Soyinka-Airewele, Aloja Airewele, Luke and Ngozi Aghanenu, Emenike and Leechi Owanta.

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secretary of the English Department at Texas State University, my new home, and Corbin Lanmon and Ray Wilson of the information technology assistance centre who helped me through Microsoft Word's rather intricate page numbering process. Many thanks to my friend and former colleague at the CLO, Osaze Lanre Nosaze, who remains my best word processing instructor, nearly two decades after he gave me my first lessons, by cleaning up the formatting cobwebs of this dissertation.

Lastly, I am grateful for Cornell's Graduate School study scholarship, and for a Provost's Diversity Fellowship towards dissertation writing. An International Institute of Education grant facilitated the candidacy phase of this project and for this I thank Akwasi Aidoo, formerly of the Ford Foundation, West Africa and New York, and now of TrustAfrica, Senegal.

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INTRODUCTION

The theme of “return to the past” constitutes a key trope of postcolonial discourse. This theme is as established in the poetics of the decolonisation struggle that saw to the emergence of the postcolonial state as in the literary acts of self-representation that flourished alongside that struggle. For colonialism,¹ as no lesser authorities than Amílcar Cabral and Frantz Fanon pointed out quite early on, is a totalitarian practice not content only to conquer, rule and exploit the colonised. It has, also, to eradicate the past of its victims the better to ensure its hold on their present and future. In the essay, “On National Culture,” Frantz Fanon described the imperialist need for obliterating the past of the colonised thus: “Perhaps we have not sufficiently demonstrated that colonialism is not content simply to impose its rule upon the present and future of the dominated country. Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. This work of devaluing pre-colonial history takes on a dialectical significance today.”² Cabral, for his part, put the matter this way: “Certainly imperialist domination calls for cultural oppression and attempts either directly or indirectly

¹ Perhaps this explanation is unnecessary but I should like to say that for the purposes of this dissertation, I have adopted the broader meaning of colonialism as a forcible subjugation and domination of lands and peoples beginning with the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

² Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 210.

to do away with the most important elements of the culture of the subject people.”³ If culture, as Cabral defines it, is “the vigorous manifestation on the ideological or idealist plane of the physical and historical reality of the society that is dominated ... simultaneously the fruit of a people’s history and a determinant of history”⁴ then it is even more apparent why the imperialist practice of colonialism would want to eradicate the past wherein the culture of the colonized has its deepest roots.

And it is similarly understandable why the colonised invariably launches the struggle for self-determination, for “identity and dignity,” by first returning to that same devalued past. But to what past does or can the colonised, and, for that matter, the postcolonial subject, return in her effort to restore the “broken connection” and attain healing? What would it mean if we read postcolonial history as not merely the verifiable record of imperialist atrocities but also as a history of the resultant trauma to the psyche of the colonised? In which case, we are confronted by non-empirical, mental processes lodged in the murky recesses of the unconscious? While postcolonial literary and cultural theory has produced an astonishing body of work that explores the politico-cultural dimension of postcoloniality, it has, regrettably, lagged sorely behind in the psychological sphere. This fact, I dare say, constitutes something of a scandal, given the sophistication of the cultural production that followed the emergence of postcolonialism as

³ Amilcar Cabral, “Identity and Dignity in the Context of the National Liberation Struggle,” in *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amilcar Cabral*, ed. Africa Information Service (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 60.

⁴ Amilcar Cabral, *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amilcar Cabral*, 41.

a discipline.⁵ Moreover, Fanon, the single pre-discipline figure with the widest influence on postcolonial theory, not only located his work in the intersection of a revolutionary anti-imperialist poetics and a revisionist psychoanalysis but—the doctor he was—also daringly prescribed the psychoanalytic procedure for tackling what he called the “black problem.” As he memorably put it, “only a psychoanalytical interpretation of the black problem can lay bare the anomalies of affect that are responsible for the structure of the complex.”⁶ Let us bring Fanon up to date and for his “black problem” say the postcolonial “condition” or “predicament”—meaning by it everything that still makes the formerly colonised regions of the world, Africa in particular, hewers of wood and drawers of water for the former colonisers.

But if Fanon was the pre-disciplinary advocate of the psychological approach for the interpretation of postcolonial writing, not so Edouard Glissant, fellow Martinican and also an influential figure in the field as writer and *bona fide* member of the academy. According to the critic, Carine Mardorossian, Glissant is perhaps the lone figure in whose work the psychoanalytical “legacy” of Fanon “can be traced.”⁷ Unfortunately, Glissant’s work is only partially available in English—a factor that many a critic, Mardorossian inclusive, often laments—but from what is available it is clear that he, like Fanon, sees

⁵ Although the point does not require elaboration, it seems fairly indisputable that this will be the period starting with the formation of the Africa Literature Association (ALA) in 1975, followed by the founding of *Research in African Literatures* as the learned journal for the field, and the publication of Edward Said’s landmark work, *Orientalism*, in 1978.

⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 10.

⁷ See Carine Mardorossian, “From Fanon to Glissant: A Martinican Genealogy.” *Small Axe*, Number 30 (vol. 13, no. 3), October 2009, 12-24.

the need for a psychoanalytic approach to postcolonial narratives as a clear imperative. At the risk of repetition much later, it is worth quoting him here even now:

Would it be ridiculous to consider our lived history as a steadily advancing neurosis? To see the Slave Trade as a traumatic shock, our relocation (in the new land) as a repressive phase, slavery as the period of latency, “emancipation” in 1848 as reactivation, our everyday fantasies as symptoms, and even our horror of “returning to those things of the past” as a possible manifestation of the neurotic’s fear of his past? Would it not be useful and revealing to investigate such a parallel? What is repressed in our history persuades us, furthermore, that this is more than an intellectual game.⁸

In this dissertation, I align myself with both Fanon and Glissant. I employ the framework of a comparative “Third World” discourse that draws from philosophical realism⁹ and psychoanalysis to examine the

⁸ Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 65-66.

⁹ I have in mind the anti-positivist notion of epistemological holism evinced by such philosophers as W. V. O. Quine, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Thomas Kuhn, among others, as well as its development in semiotics by such figures as Hilary Putnam, Mikhail Bakhtin, C. S. Peirce and Richard Boyd, to the effect that scientific knowledge is theory-dependent, contingent, and subject to review. Realists accept the essential postmodern notion of constructivism, but not the leap to radical indeterminacy. To the realist, objective knowledge is possible through an open-ended process that does not assume transcendental and error-free inquiry but that subjects self-interest and error to constant scrutiny, evaluating knowledge claims according to the degree of their correspondence to causal features of the world. But see Chapter Three below, especially pages 126-28, for a further elaboration of this view with particular reference to the use post-positivist realists make of it in interpreting the category of experience, and for my purposes here, traumatic experience.

ways in which postcolonial narratives seek to recuperate identities battered and buried beneath imperialist encrustations. Informed by the “sociodiagnostic” protocol that Fanon proposed, my project focuses on the impact of the traumas of slavery and colonialism on modes of self-understanding and healing in the black world as shown in the exemplary texts from Africa and the African diasporas of North America and the Caribbean I have chosen for my analysis. The dominant discourse within which my project intervenes is the anti-identitarian current of the postmodernist/poststructuralist theories that are so influential in the academy, no less so in postcolonial studies. Although taken together the various deconstructive tendencies within this school have profoundly deepened our understanding of the structure of power and identity formation, the logic of their methodologies tends to lead, nevertheless, to a dismissal *tout court* of social identities as mere constructs of dubious epistemic and cultural relevance, especially in the epoch of globalisation. Their proponents posit a post-identitarianism in which hybridity and cosmopolitanism are the privileged modes of social identification.

My dissertation draws from the countering current of the theories I align myself with, or performs variable readings within the hermeneutic tradition of the self-same deconstructionist protocol, to argue instead for the *re-constructive* role that identities play in social struggles. Identities, I claim, have historical and theoretical salience, what Manuel Castells, for instance, calls “the power of identity.”¹⁰

¹⁰ See Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity*, Vol. II of *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

Social identities, I assert, are both constructed and *real*, because while they are indeed culturally produced they nonetheless refer outward to constitutive features of the lived world, thereby providing vital languages for self-realization and material agency critical to progressive social change. With specific reference to the psychic impact on the (post)colonial subject of the historical traumas that shatter the very identities—for one always occupies and experiences several identities simultaneously—that must be retrieved and healed, I have used psychoanalysis as a tool of interpretation, one which far from occluding the social referents of the traumatic wound inexorably leads the careful reader there. Every narrative of trauma, I argue, points us to its historical cause. Because my exegesis necessarily embraces the category of experience, I show in my readings of both primary and secondary texts how alternative conceptions of cultural identity challenge the view that traumatic experience is not experience or that experience in general lacks cognitive value. I contest the shibboleth that all experience is mediated by language to the point of indeterminacy and defend the epistemic status of individual and collective experience as critical to any cultural struggle for capacity-building and political change.

In Chapter One, I lay out the theoretical fulcrum of my project. Entitled “Into the Zone of Occult Instability: Frantz Fanon, Post-Colonial Trauma and Identity,” I argue the need for postcolonial theory and criticism to return to the other Fanon—the doctor whose practice as a psychiatrist afforded him the vantage of close observation and treatment of the mental maladies of colonialism. And who,

consequently, was led to make his famous prescription. In doing so, I insist that the postcolonial critic is not limited to the baldly stated choice of either following the Fanon defined mostly by a narrow reading of *The Wretched of the Earth* as the prophet of revolutionary violence on the one hand, and on the other the psychoanalyst of *Black Skin, White Masks* allegedly tainted by a petit-bourgeois stink that fouls the air for self-respecting commentators. In this introductory chapter, I try to show the benefit of taking Fanon's call seriously and demonstrate it in the ensuing chapters where I examine the primary texts of this study.

In Chapter Two, "Identity or Death! The Trauma of Life and Continuity in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*," I focus on the psychological dimension of the life-and-death struggle of the colonised to compel respect for the self-sufficiency of their culture. I deploy death here in the literal and symbolic senses that Orlando Patterson so powerfully shows in his path-breaking work, *Slavery and Social Death*.¹¹ The literal deaths of Soyinka's dual protagonists—Elesin and his self-important son, Olunde—portend the symbolic death of a community caught in the "abyss of disintegration." I examine the psycho-social impact of this crisis and consider its "anomalies of affect" by drawing on the Freudian notions of *Angstbereitschaft* or readiness to feel anxiety,¹² latency, and

¹¹ See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

¹² This is the English translation of the original German, *angstbereitschaft*, in the acclaimed translation by James Strachey *et al* in *The Standard Edition (SE)*. I have, however, consulted primarily two works in which Freud uses this term as culled in *The Freud Reader* edited by Peter Gay, based on *SE*. See Sigmund Freud, "Lecture XXXII: Anxiety and Instinctual Life" in *The Freud Reader*, Peter Gay, ed. (New York:

transference, and Robert Jay Lifton's concept of "broken connection" and life continuity. I claim that the stunning impact of colonialism, a shattering and cataclysmic event, significantly determines the response of the Yoruba world which insists against the evidence on acting as if its autonomy were still intact, resulting in the tragic consequences that Soyinka so memorably depicts. This particular aspect of the structure of trauma—latency or belatedness, often resulting from a lack of preparedness for anxiety—I argue, best explains the paradox of Elesin's so-called failure of will. I also examine the transference dynamics that Soyinka betrays in writing *Horseman* in England, right inside the belly of the colonial whale, a factor I claim throws light on his contentious claim that the colonial factor is a mere catalytic incident to the events he dramatises. This, I also argue, helps explain the contradiction that attends Soyinka's dogged insistence on honour as the central theme of the play.

At this juncture, I crave the indulgence to pause and say once more that the view of colonialism as a shattering historical trauma cannot be overemphasised. I have tried to give a brief explanation of this claim with specific reference to *Horseman* above. But perhaps the point is weighty enough to permit a preliminary explanation by way of reference to a work that is not discussed here: Chinua Achebe's classic novel, aptly entitled *Things Fall Apart*. This brief excursus will further

W. W. Norton, 1989), 774-783 at 774, and "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," *The Freud Reader*, 594-627, at 609-10. But see also "Anxiety and Instinctual Life" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 22, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1955), 81-111, and "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," *SE*, vol. 18, 27-32.

clarify the claim, given that so much rests on it in the conceptualisation and elucidation of my thesis. Moreover, the novel shares several structural similarities with the play¹³ and even the briefest comparison will do. Achebe's very title speaks to the notion of the shattering of a previously existing cosmological frame and the knowledge system it subtends: things, literally and metaphorically, *fall apart*. In *Things Fall Apart* as in *Horseman*, the Igbo world synedochically portrayed in Umuofia is symbolised by vigour: we are introduced to both worlds through lyrical descriptions of Okonkwo's wrestling prowess as demonstrated in the "fiercest" fight since Umuofia was founded¹⁴ and of Elesin as "a man of enormous vitality" singing and dancing with "that infectious enjoyment of life which accompanies all his actions."¹⁵ Individual vitality connotes communal vigour underwritten by political and juridical autonomy, cultural self-sufficiency and an independent will. By the end of both narratives, however, vigour and self-sufficiency have been vitiated with tragic consequences to social cohesion. Okonkwo, as Elesin, is unable to understand the thwarting of his will—though in Okonkwo's case it is the will of his kinsmen that seems thwarted, this nonetheless results in the effective determination of his own seemingly imperturbable will, however intact he otherwise deems it. "What is it that has happened to our people? Why have they lost the power to fight?" Okonkwo, exiled

¹³ Indeed, a psychoanalytic reading of these two classic works—each the magnum opus of either writer—merits a separate essay, if not an extensive book-length treatment, and I may well take it up at some point in the future.

¹⁴ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 3.

¹⁵ Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman*, Norton Critical Edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 5.

from his father's to his mother's land for an inadvertent crime against the earth, listlessly asks his friend Obierika, the one who Achebe tells us thought deeply about things. As Obierika narrates one tale of woe after another in the wake of the colonial government's overthrow of the old order, the sense of a shattered world becomes clearer. Then the report turns to a land dispute which Okonkwo, together with the other eight masked elders of Umuofia, would have adjudicated before the advent of colonialism. "What has happened to that piece of land in dispute?" Okonkwo asks. To which Obierika replies, "The white man's court has decided that it should belong to Nnama's family, who had given money to the white man's messengers and interpreter." When Okonkwo responds with the obvious question, "Does the white man understand our custom about land?" Obierika makes the following profound statement that testifies to the precise manner colonialism wrenched the Igbo world from its axis and thereby shattered its frame of reference, its horizon of meaning:

How can he understand our custom about land? How can he when he does not speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.

Achebe's precise diction, almost clinically anti-sceptic, skirts a psycho-social diagnostic. It is true that colonialism put a knife on the things that held the colonised together and they fell apart. And we can add that the neo-colonial knife is even sharper and cuts much deeper. But such plainly empirical observation of the phenomenon as Obierika displays, while crucial to the social consciousness needed by any strategy of resistance, does not fully account for all its catastrophic dimensions. For instance, Obierika's philosophical bent of mind does not even begin to apprehend the oedipal sources of Okonkwo's tragedy, a struggle captured by the personal trauma of Okonkwo constituted by the fear of failure, of being like his "worthless" father, Unoka.¹⁶ Nor does he recognise that same father-son death-dialectic as what drives Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, to the colonial religion and makes him turn his back on his own people, including his father. Even more significantly, Obierika's counsel fails to prevent his great and dear friend from the abomination of suicide. All that it avails him and

¹⁶ On this point, I am happy to note that Biodun Jeyifo comes very close, via a differing protocol, to the kind of psychological reading that the psychoanalytic would more readily yield in his essay, "Okonkwo and his Mother: *Things Fall Apart* and Issues of Gender in the Constitution of African Postcolonial Discourse," *Callaloo*, vol. 16. No. 4 (Autumn, 1993), 847-858. As with Adebayo Williams's "Ritual and the Political Unconscious: The Case of *Death and the King's Horseman*," *Research in African Literatures* 24.1 (Spring 1993), which I discuss in this chapter, however, Jeyifo is able to come this close because of the implicit Marxist-drawn concept of the political unconscious, expostulated by Frederic Jameson, which owes much of its power to psychoanalysis. For, remarkably, although Jeyifo cites Fanon, it is not *Black Skin, White Masks* but arguably his most politically-charged essay, "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness" in *The Wretched of the Earth*. I should quickly say that I do not imply that Jeyifo *ought* to have turned to the psychoanalytic Fanon, nor that his very insightful essay loses anything on that score. I do suggest, however, that these indirect ways of reaching the psychological show that its terrain remains under-theorised in post-colonial literary criticism and that this lapse would be more directly dealt with through a reading that privileges the psychoanalytical paradigm.

the community is impotent rage at the District Commissioner when faced with the ignoble death of his friend: “That man”—pointing to Okonkwo’s body dangling from a tree—“was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog.”¹⁷ If the psychoanalytic subsumes the socio-political and refers us inexorably to lived experience, then it also points us in the way we should go in examining the lingering effects of colonial domination in the postcolony.

To return to the summary of this project: a two-fold ambition lies behind Chapter Three, “Experience as the Best Teacher: Trauma, Reference and Realism in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.” In this chapter, I argue that the novel’s trope of wilful amnesia is actually more historically determined than being a conscious act of agency—as its protagonists, Sethe and Paul D, would have the reader believe. Here I affirm experience as an objective category of knowledge by focusing on trauma as its avowed limit case. I read *Beloved* as a narrative of historical trauma to counter the claim that trauma lacks experiential or epistemic dimensions. Drawing instead on the realist social communication theory of language, especially the view of reference as epistemologically verifiable, I defend trauma as a legitimate but intransigent form of experience with cognitive salience. The aim of this performance is to expand the horizon of agency to the day-to-day field of the social to which every trauma refers us. Additionally, I present the outline of an adequate theory of reference that would achieve the aim that well-meaning deconstructionists, taking Cathy Caruth as my

¹⁷ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 175-76 and 208.

example, set themselves but fail to achieve due to the limitations of their theory. For it is true, indeed, that “language can give us access to history.” The implicit goal here is to exhume the buried or repressed trauma of slavery as a form of colonialism by linking it to its meaning-making referents in the social world, thus creating the material condition for a proper burying of the past through its acknowledgement and working-through.

In chapter four, entitled “Till the Word and the Wound Fit”: History, Memory, and Healing of the Post-Colonial Body-Politic in Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*,” I focus on healing at the individual and collective levels through the prisms provided by the concepts of acting-out and working-through. What does it mean to “work through” a traumatic experience, and what role does the past play in it? In particular, what does Walcott mean by avowing that the traumatic wound of the West Indies emblematised by the Middle Passage, physically embodied in Philoctete and psychically in Major Plunkett, can be healed only after a coming-to-terms with the very history that inflicted it? And does this notion, as well as Walcott’s complex poetics of identity, which insists on a specifically New World understanding that is neither wholly beholden to an idyllic African image of grandeur nor an abject West Indian slave image, subvert identity and national belonging in favour of some indeterminate idea of hybridity and in-betweenness? In short, can there be any such thing as “a free-floating wound” of history? I argue against the tendency to read Walcott “postmodernly” as one critic notes even while proceeding to do exactly what she abjures. Reading some of the more vexing moments of

Walcott's ambivalence on the subject of identity as an index of trauma, I examine the manner in which *Omeros* depicts identity at the open horizon of self-recreation, with the subject as agent of collective healing. I pay attention to the gendering of healing agency in this epic poem, especially the way in which women stand as figures of ancestral memory and for the medical cum sacerdotal and socio-political healing that "closes" the wound of history.

My primary texts, by pure coincidence, span the major literary genres of drama, fiction and poetry. I say "pure coincidence" because I was led to them by the problem I set out to examine—establishing the case for trauma as a valid mode of experience, and, so, a critical determinant of social identity—and not the other way round. Admittedly, I was pointed in this direction by demurrals to the post-positivist realist reading of *Beloved* as too "epistemocentric." What, it was posed as a challenge, would happen to the realist's core claim when confronted by limit or aporetic cases of experience, such as depicted by trauma, which are bound to thwart a realist reading? I wished to revisit *Beloved* to attempt an answer. But having defined the black world as my field of study, *Horseman* and *Omeros* naturally drew my attention, being narratives that grapple with the trauma of (post)colonialism as well as the ensuing struggle to recuperate shattered identities. What then unites these three texts and renders them more amenable to the psychoanalytic paradigm is the fact that an elucidation of the mechanism of historical trauma, including its trans-generational transmission, and, so, the psychic state of the post-colonial state and subject, constitutes their plots. By another

happenstance, these three narratives inscribe a race-wide consciousness that sees clearly beyond the local circumstances of their setting in time and place. In this, I have not found the formal constraints of genre to significantly alter the manner of apprehending and working-through the trauma of (post)colonialism. Indeed, it is the case that the three authors of my primary texts, who are celebrated for their masterful deployment of language—no surprise that Soyinka and Walcott are respectively poet and playwright as well—blur the assumed genre boundaries and return us in each case to the old definition of poetry. Indeed, each of my three texts emblematises language as figure.

The underlying logic of this dissertation is this: identities are a matter of life-and-death to those whose cultures are threatened by (social) death under imperial domination—whether in the form of chattel slavery, or colonial and neo-colonial exploitation under the sign of globalisation. Without an acknowledgement of the trauma of colonialism and its inherited effects (as well as new causes which repeat the old), literal and social death become the defining predicament of the postcolonial subject. The argument thus moves from this bleak prospect of denial or repression (literal and social death), to acknowledgement (awakening self-consciousness and the possibility of healing) and the working-through of postcolonial trauma (the reconstitution, or I should say, reconstruction, of identity, agency and self-determination).

CHAPTER ONE

INTO “THE ZONE OF OCCULT INSTABILITY”: FRANTZ FANON, POST-COLONIAL TRAUMA AND IDENTITY

If the eighties were the decade of Frantz Fanon’s emergence as a “global theorist” amenable to any theoretical postulations on the postcolonial condition and the universality of oppression, as Henry Louis Gates suggests in his essay, “Critical Fanonism,”¹ then it is no coincidence that I should have encountered Fanon for the first time in that fortuitous epoch. Precisely in 1987, as a sophomore in law at the University of Benin in Nigeria. As part of my initiation into the Cultural Awareness Club—a radical campus group actively involved in the national student movement and successor to its banned predecessor, the League of Patriotic Students—I was given a list of books that were compulsory reading for every new member. Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* was among the top five on the list, the others being Karl Marx and Frederick Engels’s *The Communist Manifesto*, Walter Rodney’s *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Engels’s *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, and Paul Frère’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Somehow, I never got round to reading the last. Boasting no previous familiarity with “theory” other than what I had gleaned from the newspapers, especially the views of the Nigerian and African writers towards which my budding love of

¹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Critical Fanonism,” *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Spring 1991), 457-470.

poetry and writing had inclined me, I found this moment a truly epochal one. Moreover, as fate would have it, I entered the university at the very time when resistance to military dictatorship that had resulted in the proscription of national and local student union activity had taken on the spirit of defiance. Such that while still insisting on its ban on the National Association of Nigerian Students, the military regime of the day had nevertheless come to concede the resumption of local student union activity. At my university, agitations had forced the administration, after several ruses, to allow an election.

As it happened, however, most of the old members of the Cultural Awareness Club under its old name had been banned from participating in student union elections. Not deeming it a worthy battle fighting for their unbanning before we could have our union back, it was decided that we would field candidates principally for the position of Secretary-General but also for any other position for which we had enough bodies from among the new members. I was persuaded, against my protests of not being ready so soon to take up a position of leadership in the highly political and risky business of student unionism in a neo-colonial outpost, to run for the office of Secretary-General. Lacking the resources that other individuals and campus interest groups seemed to have in abundance, we began to campaign rather late and managed to put out posters and leaflets with just two days before the election. But this is where I “appropriated” the revolutionary Fanon of *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Toward the*

African Revolution, the one unsoiled by the “petit-bourgeois stink”² Cedric Robinson believes taints the first work, *Black Skin, White Masks*, a book I would not even read until a full fifteen years later. The only distinguishing feature of a hurriedly produced campaign poster were Fanon’s famous words: “Each generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfil it, or betray it.” Two other Fanonian staples made up the handbill: “Every onlooker is either a traitor or a coward,”³ and “The future will have no pity for those men who, possessing the exceptional privilege of being able to speak words of truth to their oppressors, have taken refuge in an attitude of passivity, of mute indifference, and sometimes of cold complicity.”⁴ I won the election, with the revolutionary Fanon enough, it seemed, to rally the student voters to our side.

But in returning to the Fanon of *Black Skin, White Masks*, I choose a text in which (post)colonial trauma and the crisis of identity it produces are highlighted. Would it be right to conclude, then, that I have abandoned the revolutionary Fanon? And are there really two Fanons—the one revolutionary and the other compromised by class ideology and by political immaturity, as Robinson implies? In what other ways, other than in appropriating Fanon as the high priest of revolutionary violence and *The Wretched of the Earth* as the handbook of revolution, can we make him speak to the lingering and complex

² See Cedric Robinson, “The Appropriation of Frantz Fanon,” *Race & Class* 35, 1:79-91 at 82.

³ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 206, and *Toward the African Revolution*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 199.

⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, 117.

questions of the postcolonial predicament? Of course, in invoking Fanon for the urgent needs of a student body battling an unconscionable military dictatorship, I was far from the discursive appropriations of him that Gates and Robinson deplore and from which Tony Martin felt called upon to “rescue” him as early as 1970.⁵

Nevertheless, in this dissertation, it is the Fanon of *Black Skin, White Masks*, whom I discovered a full decade and a half later, that I have been more eager to summon. And in this chapter, I focus on the formidable obstacles constituted by colonial trauma to an accurate consciousness of self. This necessarily involves an exploration of the psychological dimension of postcolonial identity struggles.

Consequently, I find it possible to both accept Gates’s caution on the dangers of deploying Fanon *in vacuo* and to insist on the colonial paradigm which he thinks ought to be abandoned. I argue that the psychological, whatever the level of significance the critic might be pleased to allow it, is crucial to any struggle aimed at the *total* liberation of the colonised. It follows that I also dispute Robinson’s claim that Fanon was purportedly led by his animus towards negritude into “prioritizing the derivative and psychological,”⁶ a claim that cannot withstand proper scrutiny. As all careful critics rightly point out, Gates among them, Fanon set for himself the task of creating “a new identity” at the “intersection of colonial and psychoanalytic discourse,” a view I will return to below. Thus, while Fanon may have very boldly asserted that “only a psychoanalytical

⁵ See Toni Martin, “Rescuing Fanon from the Critics,” *African Studies Review* 13, 3: 381-99.

⁶ Cedric Robinson, “The Appropriation of Frantz Fanon,” 80.

interpretation of the black problem can lay bare the anomalies of affect that are responsible for the structure of the complex,” he was nonetheless quick to circumscribe that approach within the dynamic of the socio-political realities of colonialism, thus adumbrating the role of an adequate theory of reference.

My title—in particular, the words “trauma” and “instability”—announce the reason why I should find *Black Skin, White Masks* more relevant to my immediate need: that of showing how the psychological, which Fanon used interchangeably with the psychoanalytical, is vital to the project of reconstituting postcolonial identity. A trauma, simply defined, is injury to the body or mind, caused by an act or event so violent or cataclysmic in its impact that it shatters the existing frame of reference, thereby defying ready understanding.⁷ If, as Fanon and Glissant suggest, colonialism constitutes a traumatic event, what then is the extent and nature of the damage it caused to the mind of the colonised, and so to self-perception? And how might that “wound of history” be healed? That immeasurable damage was done to the psyche of the (post)colonial subject is gospel truth to the psychoanalytic and historico-materialist critic alike. Thus, when Ngugi wa Thiong’o speaks of the urgent need of “decolonising the mind,”⁸ he describes the same project as Fanon and Glissant. But psychoanalysis makes things clearer, so to speak, by focussing on the mind; more particularly, that realm of the mind called the unconscious where the

⁷ See below and the ensuing chapters for definitions and elaborations of the term.

⁸ See Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Oxford and Portsmouth: James Currey/Heinemann, 1986).

repressed experience of colonial dispossession lurks. As Freud shows, and I discuss below in Chapter Two, a traumatic event stuns the mind's capacity to process and assign external stimuli to the appropriate mental regions, thus letting the unmediated experience direct entrance into the unconscious. Consequently, the traumatic event returns by way of compulsive acts that repeat or mime the original event in the mind's belated effort to master it.

But this is repetition without understanding where an accurate knowledge of what happened is needed. In this state, the postcolonial subject, and quite often the community to which she belongs, lacks a wholesome sense of self and suffers what is commonly described as an identity crisis. It is a crisis exacerbated by the "helplessness" of the colonised under the sway of a seemingly irresistible ideological and political apparatus of colonial power, leading her to debilitating self-doubt. In short, the trauma of colonialism creates, according to Robert Jay Lifton, a "radically altered" sense of self, even a "second self" different from the determined and "traumatized self"⁹ which supposedly recalls the original, pre-traumatic one. But because the colonised, in this traumatic state, cannot come to an accurate self-understanding, instability dogs her every effort to recapture the old self or to reconstitute a new one from the "ashes" of the traumatised one. Since this is inevitably a psychic conflict, psychoanalysis presents us the interpretive tool with the sharpest cutting edge for digging into the mental scape wherein it plays itself out primarily. Thus, for

⁹ See Cathy Caruth, "An Interview with Robert Jay Lifton" in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 128-147, at 137.

instance—and to give just one example here—I show in Chapter Two, where I discuss Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*, how the peculiar insights of psychoanalysis clarify the exact nature of the struggle to recover a divided will that Elesin, as indeed the entire Oyo kingdom, suffers. Psychoanalysis becomes, in this instance, the discursive practice that bests shows us how to recognise and work-through the lingering effects of colonial trauma in the psyche of the postcolonial subject, even when—or, especially because—the radically altered sense of self and society that ensues from it is actively denied.

In order to show the way in which psychoanalysis, as revised by Fanon for the (post)colonial context, is relevant to the project of healing the imperial wound of history and reclaiming identity, I will first highlight the discursive appropriations of Fanon, revealing in the process the slow but gradual recognition of the vitality of the psychoanalytic work to the completion of the decolonisation project. Since Gates and Robinson represent two differing ideological approaches to Fanon, I will discuss their essays in some detail the better to specify the point at which I engage Fanon for a psychoanalytic approach to the primary texts that form my study. The range of unlikely places where Gates finds that Fanon is unhesitatingly drafted into battle is indeed fascinating. From British romanticism and the interdisciplinary practices of the new historicism to re-readings of the Renaissance, it has been possible, Gates informs us, to call Fanon to duty in the service of “a grand, unified theory of oppression.” While the insurrectionary force of Fanon’s theory and its resultant universal appeal may be a source of pride to many who labour in the salt mines

of minority and ethnic studies, something of academia's internal colony, it comes however with the inescapable price of popularity or the chic factor. Fanon, Gates charges, is too often adopted "as both totem and text," as a global theorist *in vacuo* denied "his own historical particularity" inescapably marked by his personal crisis of identity. Surprisingly, though, it is not the "outside" appropriations that Gates is most troubled by¹⁰ but those launched by Fanon's legitimate (post)colonial heirs:

If Said made of Fanon an advocate of post-modern counter-narratives of liberation; if JanMohamed made of Fanon a Manichaeist theorist of colonialism as absolute negation; and if Bhabha cloned, from Fanon's *theoria*, another Third World post-structuralist, Parry's Fanon ... turns out to confirm her own rather optimistic vision of literature and social action.¹¹

Gates declares an "extremely limited" goal of providing a prelude to a reading of Fanon through contemporary colonial discourse theory, and with the benefit of his own readings of several of today's most influential postcolonial theorists, attempts to show us the pitfalls of an *uncritical* fanonism. Or, more specifically, the propensity to succumb to "the imperial agenda of global theory" and, consequently, to "elevate" Fanon above his localities of discourse, thereby disregarding the lesson of his disclaimer that he was irreducibly a man of his time,

¹⁰ I do not mean by this that he may not indeed have similar or even stronger objections to their appropriations, only that in this essay he does not cite their misappropriations or misreadings but reserves his critique for Fanon's fellow postcolonial theorists.

¹¹ Henry Louis Gates, "Critical Fanonism, 465; subsequent reference within the text.

and certainly not a visionary of the world to come. Gates regrets that in the context of the fraught colonial binarism of self/other which Fanon devoted his short but prodigiously fruitful life to explaining and transcending, “we’ve seldom admitted how disruptive the psychoanalytic model can be, elaborating a productive relation between oppressed and oppressor—productive of each as speaking subjects.” The fault, Gates believes, lies in a tendency by postcolonial critics to conduct their enquiry entirely within “the colonial paradigm,” hence his urgent call that we move beyond “the colonial paradigm,” convinced as he is that while it has proved valuable in foregrounding issues of power and position” it nonetheless has reached its limit and so it “may be time to question its ascendance in literary and cultural studies” (457 et seq).

Robinson, on the other hand, thinks that Gates is as guilty of misappropriating Fanon as any of his immediate targets, and, even worse, of being an “anti-Fanonist.” Robinson considers Gates to be closer to Spivak and Bhabha, card-carrying members of the poststructuralist and deconstructionist school of discourse whose project is necessarily “laced with aporias and disjunctures” (466) than Said, JanMohamed and Parry who according to him represent what Fanon embodied, which is “the sustained attempt to locate and subsequently advertise a fixed and stable site of radical liberationist criticism and creativity.”¹² For a moment, it would seem Robinson and Gates believe in the same thing: reinscribing the specificity of time and place from which Fanon did his difficult work of interpreting the

¹² Cedric Robinson, “The Appropriation of Frantz Fanon,” 88.

troubling colonised-coloniser relationship. But since Gates's own post-structuralist sympathies lead him towards the aporetic, it would seem that he desires Fanon's specificity only to repudiate it by emphasising those inchoate moments in his biography and theory that subvert particularity. So Gates states as follows:

My claim is that what Jacques Derrida calls writing, Spivak, in a brilliant reversal, has renamed colonial discourse. So it is no accident that the two terms share precisely the same functionality. The Derridian *mot*, that there is nothing outside the text, is reprised as the argument that there is nothing outside (the discourse of) colonialism. And it leads, as well, to the argument that this very discourse must be read as heterogeneous to itself, as laced with the aporias and disjunctures that any deconstructive reading must elicit and engage. (466)

If an awareness of what a deconstructive reading does to his larger claim of establishing Fanon's historical particularity, of "rehistoricizing Fanon," obliges Gates to call for the abandonment of the colonial paradigm, it is only so as to make it easier for us to admit just "how disruptive the psychoanalytic model can be," especially how well it marks "the exceptional instability" of Fanon's rhetoric. In short, to acknowledge Fanon as "a battlefield in himself," with all the terrifying vagaries, the grave uncertainties, that this metaphor evokes. It is no surprise, therefore, that Gates then goes on to propose "theoretical reflections [that] must be as provisional, reactive, and local as the *texts*

we reflect upon.” But surprisingly, Gates concludes that heeding his call will lead to the “recognition that we, too, just as much as Fanon, may be fated to rehearse the agonisms of a culture that may never earn the title of *postcolonial*” (470). Two things strike the reader here: Gates’s recommendation that we approach Fanon, in essence, as a text, and that we abandon the colonial paradigm even when, according to him, we are for all intents and purposes still firmly entrenched within the colonial and may very well never transcend it. What explains this contradiction—or ambivalence, to use a milder word? In disagreeing with Gates’s proposition here, my problem is not with the assertion that all knowledge claims, within or outside of discourse, are provisional or contingent being always subject to review, but that Gates seems to assume that the only discursive formation alive to the complexity or heterogeneity of issues of power and position in the postcolony is the poststructuralist or deconstructionist one. Or, that any theorist working within the colonial paradigm is bound to end up with the sort of unsophisticated Manichaeism that leads him to seek an immediate exit from “the ‘disciplinary enclave’ of anti-imperialist discourse” (469). For Gates, it seems, the only option available to anyone who must recognise the density of the colonised-coloniser relationship, which constitutes the productive site of Fanon’s oeuvre, is total rejection of the constricting colonial discourse paradigm in favour of an interpretive method hinged on indeterminacy—on aporia and disjuncture. But that we can achieve Gates’s avowed aim of reclaiming Fanon’s (post)colonial identity without making of him an eternally open text, even when adopting the psychoanalytic approach,

is by and large the burden of this work as I hope to show in the rest of this introduction and in the subsequent chapters.

What is clear from the foregoing is that the slippery position Gates assumes in this essay appears to be the result of his wish to follow the Derridian prescript of privileging textual analysis—since, after all, there is nothing outside the text. This renders Gates vulnerable to the accusation that he wishes to “preserve and consume Fanon all in the same moment.”¹³ For his part, Robinson appears too polemical and seems overly keen to relegate the psychological mode of interrogating the postcolonial quandary to the secondary in a way that creates a false dichotomy and disregards the significance Fanon attached to it. Robinson does not subordinate the psychological for the same reason that Gates elevates it—because it constitutes a disruptive model and so poses an effective antidote to a binary identity politics that ignores the “productive relation between oppressed and oppressor ... as speaking subjects.”¹⁴ Yet it is not clear that “the mature Fanon turned away from psychoanalysis and its preoccupation with sexuality as the explanatory paradigm for the ‘Black problem’” as Robinson claims. Nor that the psychoanalytic approach is averse to the project of inscribing “the fixed and stable site of radical liberationist criticism and creativity,” whatever this means. For we may ask, are there ever any such fixed and unchanging points of intellectual engagement and can we insist on them without seeming to wax nostalgic about the good old days of essentialist discourse? On the contrary, it is possible

¹³ Cedric Robinson, “The Appropriation of Frantz Fanon,” 87, 88.

¹⁴ Henry Louis Gates, “Critical Fanonism,” 470.

to assert that far from turning away from psychoanalysis, Fanon's entire work began and ended on that note: starting with *Black Skin, White Masks* and ending tellingly with "Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders," the closing chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* in which he examines various manifestations, during the "period of successful colonization," of the "regular and important mental pathology which is the direct product of oppression."¹⁵ Any reader not turned off by the "petit-bourgeois stink" of the psychoanalytic will find its traces scattered all over the work in-between. Indeed, Fanon's remark that perhaps his closing chapter of *The Wretched* would be found "ill-timed and singularly out of place" but that "we can do nothing about that" (249) ought to caution against the inclination to make the psychological subservient to the political in his theory. Fanon can be this disdainful in anticipating such criticism because he sees clearly that colonialism does not merely "depersonalize" the colonised individual but also that the "depersonalization is equally felt in the collective sphere, on the level of social structures." Consequently, "the colonized people find that they are reduced to a body of individuals who only find cohesion when in the presence of the colonizing nation." Gates rightly points out that Fanon set himself the task of creating "a new identity" at the "intersection of colonial and psychoanalytic discourse." In other words, at the point where the subjugated internalises colonialism's historico-racial schema, as Fanon himself explained it:

¹⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 251; subsequent reference within the text.

In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. ... Below the corporeal schema I had sketched a historico-racial schema. The elements that I used had been provided for me not by “residual sensations and perceptions primarily of a tactile, vestibular, kinaesthetic, and visual character,” but by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories.¹⁶

Fanonian psychoanalysis, derived from Lacan and Marx, is practicable only to the extent that “the social aspect of human reality” remains essential.¹⁷ Thus, he locates the efficacy of his approach within the social realism of colonialism: “The analysis I am undertaking is psychological. In spite of this it is apparent to me that the effective disalienation of the black man entails an immediate recognition of the social and economic realities.” As Fanon was at pains to point out, a focus on the individual is not to the exclusion or expense of the social, but, on the contrary, can only be meaningful symptomatically. If there is an inferiority complex, he insisted, “it is the outcome of a double process” that is “primarily, economic” and “subsequently, the internalization ... or, better, the epidermalization ... of this inferiority.”

¹⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 110-11; subsequent reference within the text.

¹⁷ Françoise Vergès discusses this dynamic of madness and freedom as it informed Fanon’s theory and practice of psychoanalysis in her essay, “Chains of Madness, Chains of Freedom: Fanon and Freedom” in *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1996), 47-75. The quotations, cited by Fanon in his medical school thesis at Lyon, are taken from the essay at page 50.

Fanon even ventures to proffer a synthesis of the two processes, a “solution” for his goal of total understanding” of this overdetermining reality of colonialism:

“Freud insisted that the individual factor be taken into account through psychoanalysis. He substituted for a phylogenetic theory the ontogenetic perspective. It will be seen that the black man’s alienation is not an individual question. Beside phylogeny and ontogeny stands sociogeny. ... let us say that this is a question of a sociodiagnostic.”¹⁸

In claiming that Fanon was misled by his animus towards negritude into “prioritising the derivative and psychological,”¹⁹ Robinson either mistakes or overstates the way sexual desire figures in Fanon’s discussion of the problem of the woman of color and the white man and of the man of color and the white woman. In both cases, Fanon is more concerned with a struggle for recognition and reciprocity, with the quest of the colonised for equal humanity with the coloniser, than with sexual neurosis as classical psychoanalysis would have it. Locked in a world of “reciprocal exclusivity” justified by the racial (il)logic of colonialism, the ensuing material conditions of existence produce the psychic state—or the “nervous condition”²⁰ as Jean-Paul Satre memorably puts it in his often-cited preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*—that culminates in the form of acting-out, if you will, Fanon names as (revolutionary) violence. But it is a measure of Fanon’s

¹⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 11.

¹⁹ Cedric Robinson, “The Appropriation of Frantz Fanon,” 80.

²⁰ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 20.

adroit melding of the psychological and the political that he paints a compelling graphic picture of the separate and unequal worlds of the coloniser and the colonised only to underscore it with the psychic states of their respective inhabitants:

The look that the native turns on the settler's town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses his dreams of possession—all manner of possession: to sit at the settler's table, to sleep with his wife if possible. The colonized man is an envious man. And this the settler knows very well; when their glances meet he ascertains bitterly, always on the defensive, "They want to take our place. It is true, for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler's place. (39)

If *The Wretched of the Earth* is the revolutionary handbook, "the Bible of decolonization" as Stuart Hall dubs it,²¹ Fanon nevertheless always finds room in it for the psychoanalytical in his search for the sources of the colonised person's affective disorders.²² According to Homi

²¹ Quoted by Homi Bhabha in his Foreword to Richard Philcox's translation of *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), xvi. Bhabha cites an interview with Stuart Hall in the film, *Frantz Fanon: White Skin, Black Masks*, dir. Isaac Julien (UK: Arts Council of England, 1996).

²² Having arrived at the conclusion that the psychoanalytic is not only present in all of Fanon's work but that, in fact, it also frames his entire work in the literal sense of marking its beginning and end as already noted, I was pleasantly surprised to stumble on Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson's recent work, *Crossroads in the Black Aegean: Oedipus, Antigone, and Dramas of the African Diaspora* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) in which they boldly assert that "the psychoanalytic apparatus persists in *The Wretched of the Earth*." Because they base their claim primarily on the passage that I discuss above on the material and psychological bifurcation of the colonized space, I will quote them at some length:

"[T]he psychoanalytic apparatus persists in *The Wretched of the Earth* and nowhere more so than in this formulation of the segregated colonial city:
The look that the native turns on the settler's town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses his dreams of possession—all manner of

Bhabha, this demography of the colonial city reflects Fanon's view of "the psychic structure of the colonial relation."²³ Indeed, it requires little scrutiny to find that sexual desire in Fanon is itself a veil, a mask, beneath which lurks the agitated quest of the colonised for liberation as a precondition for recognition. So Fanon's own answer to his question, "What does the black man [and woman] want?" is, simply, that "The black man wants to be like the white man. For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white. Long ago the black man admitted the unarguable superiority of the white man, and all his efforts are aimed at achieving a white existence." And with this awareness comes dreams of possession, all manner of possession, including but not limited to sleeping with the coloniser's wife—with a white woman—if possible. This picture, of course, gets more complicated with the desire of the white woman or man to "sleep" with the black person, but that is a matter that does not concern us here. What is crucial is that Fanon is fully aware that the image of the Negro which the colonised struggles to destroy—as indeed the image of the white man that he or she craves for recognition—is a construct, a false

possession: to sit at the settler's table, to sleep with his wife if possible. The colonized man is an envious man. And this the settler knows very well; when their glances meet he ascertains bitterly, always on the defensive, "They want to take our place. It is true, for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler's place. (98)

Commenting on this passage, they say as follows: "The oedipal dynamics in this scene are quite evident: the colonial subject seeks to possess his object of desire by occupying the position that the colonizer uses to possess that same object and which he denies to the colonial subject precisely by occupying himself. The partial pun between 'setting' and 'settler' in the last sentence says it all."

²³ Homi Bhabha, "Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition" in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, eds., Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York; Columbia University Press, 1994), 120.

object: “The Negro is not. Any more than the white man.”²⁴ This is identity politics as it first plays out in all of its turbulence in the psyche, priming the colonised subject for the inevitable confrontation with a world that seeks to completely overdetermine him or her from without, and expressed by Fanon in one of his most poignant moments thus: “Because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: ‘In reality, who am I?’”²⁵

This gender neutral passage is one of the few moments when Fanon avoids his problematic deployment of the universal “black man” for the colonised, and how remarkable it is! It is once again a pointer to what Fanon means when he insists on psychoanalysis “even though Freud and Adler and the cosmic Jung did not think of the Negro in all their investigations.” The specific nature of the trauma of the colonised, characterised not by the desire of the son for the mother and the father’s threat of castration—to follow the classical psychoanalytic paradigm—but by the self-abnegating effect of racism and political domination lie at the heart of Fanon’s controversial claim, “Like it or not, the Oedipus complex is far from coming into being

²⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 228, 231.

²⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 250. This sense of a fragmented self, of a negating depersonalization, as a consequence of colonialism’s racial-epidermal scheme is what Sethe pleads in mitigation of her crime of infanticide before the “returned” daughter, Beloved, in the context of slavery, an earlier form of colonialism: “That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up.” See Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage, 2004), 295 and Chapter 3 below where I discuss the social referentiality of historical trauma.

among Negroes.”²⁶ As a prelude to this declaration, Fanon states just as emphatically—“this is a most important point,” he says—that a “normal Negro child, having grown up within a normal family, will become abnormal on the slightest contact with the white world” (143). The point is not whether or not Fanon is right, and arguments have been advanced to show he is not,²⁷ but that his translation of a preoccupation by psychoanalysis with sexual difference into racial difference in the colonial context is possible only because he is after different fish: disalienation as part and parcel of the decolonization of the nation towards the full realisation of full humanity by the colonised. For Fanon, disalienation or the struggle for self-determination, is a *sine qua non* of freedom. “Before it can adopt a positive voice,” he maintains, “freedom requires an effort at

²⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 151-52.

²⁷ Hortense J. Spillers discusses the book, *Oedipe Africain* (Paris: Éditions L’Harmattan, 1984), by Marie-Cécile and Edmond Ortigues which I cite below in Chapter 1 to such an end in her essay, “All the Things You Could Be Now, If Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother’: Psychoanalysis and Race” in her *Black, White, and in Color* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 376-427. Unfortunately, *Oedipe Africain* is yet to be available in English and I relied wholly on Spillers’s working translations to the effect that the Oedipus complex, which Fanon claims is absent from the Negro world, may in fact be well and alive in Africa, for instance, with the necessary substitutions for the father-figure and his law within its well-known extended family system. Similarly, regarding Fanon’s claim that a normal black child who grows up within a normal family becomes abnormal only on contact with the white world, Françoise Vegès has cited evidence, from a Martinican no less, of the limits of this attempt to oppose a healthy black family to an alienating white society. See her “Creole Skin, Black Mask: Fanon and Disavowal,” *Critical Inquiry* 23 (Spring 1997) 578-595, at 583-85. Several feminist critics have subjected Fanon to rigorous cross-examination on his substitution of racial difference for sexual difference, and their gender approach has enriched our understanding of Fanon’s problematic portrayal of the woman. See Gwen Bergner, “Who Is that Masked Woman? Or, The Role of Gender in Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*,” *PMLA* 110, 1: 75-88 and “Politics and Pathologies: On the Subject of Race in Psychoanalysis” in *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Anthony C. Alessandrini (New York: Routledge, 1999), 219-234; and E. Ann Kaplan’s “Fanon, Trauma and Cinema,” also in *Frantz Fanon, Critical Perspectives*, 146-157.

disalienation.”²⁸ As Clare Counihan points out in her essay, “Reading the Figure of Woman in African Literature: Psychoanalysis, Difference, and Desire,” this psychoanalytic imperative towards a political goal may not have been as “fully articulated” in *Black Skin, White Masks* as in either *The Wretched of the Earth* or *A Dying Colonialism*. Yet, it is hardly mistakable on close inspection. According to Counihan, the move that Fanon makes here is not to be seen as “just a *transliteration* of terms and language, swapping one word for another so that the difference of race is *like* the difference of sex.” Rather, Counihan claims, Fanon’s translation “fundamentally replaces sexual difference with racial difference so that sexual difference disappears into and from racial difference, and racial difference becomes the primary (sole) mode of difference.”²⁹ For the same reason, Fanon’s appropriation of the psychoanalytic trope of castration departs from its primary signification:

For Fanon, castration is not about “the penis” as the penis. As his simultaneous disavowal and rewriting of the Oedipus complex indicates, “the Oedipus complex is far from coming into being among Negroes.” ... Fanon refuses *any* agency or efficacy to the primal scene, the moment of *sexual* identification and differentiation. Instead, “when the Negro makes contact with the white world, a certain sensitizing action takes place,” and the recognition of *racial* difference supplants the original Oedipal confrontation. ... In the same vein, Fanon rereads the mirror

²⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 231.

²⁹ Clare Counihan, “Reading the Figure of Woman in African Literature: Psychoanalysis, Difference, and Desire,” *Research in African Literatures* 38.2 (2007), 161-180, at 165.

stage: “when one has grasped the mechanism described by Lacan ... one can have little further doubt that the *real* Other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man. And conversely.” ... Gone are the Law and the Name of the Father. (166)

For their part, Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson see what Fanon disavows as merely a “perverted” or “arrested” Oedipus complex, a view that they proffer in their reading, within the colonial paradigm, of Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex* in the light of the historic use Freud made of that classical story and of its adaptation by the Nigerian playwright, Ola Rotimi, in *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. A perverted Oedipus complex because in their understanding of Fanon,

To be a colonial subject ... is not only to be constituted by the Oedipus complex, in the way that psychoanalysis claims that absolutely everybody must be, but it is also to be trapped within that complex, to be unable to ‘progress’ through it and to emerge from it, by means of identification and introjection, into full subjecthood. The colonial subject is constituted and arrested as a child, albeit a useful and fearsome one.

In *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, according to Goff and Simpson, Rotimi’s adaptation of the “psychoanalytically charged Greek play” whose setting presupposes a colonial context between Athens and Thebes reimagines that conflict in a way that affirms the “equation between the [perverted] Oedipus complex and the colonial relation.” There is,

according to them, the necessary implication of a “regression within the psychoanalytic model, in so far as Odewale ... does not suffer from the Oedipus complex but instead acts out his murderous desire and his amorous desire.” Whether or not we agree that this equation is specifically mobilised in Rotimi’s play, Goff and Simpson argue, certain parallels with Fanon’s diagnosis can be traced. In particular, they see a corroboration of Fanon’s thesis of the absent Oedipus complex “not by dramatizing its importation but by demonstrating its circumvention in what becomes, allegorically, the project of decolonization.” The result, they maintain, is that Fanon’s thesis is “developed beyond its own remit” as the consequent result of eliminating the colonizer becomes consistent with Fanon’s assertion that “the colonial subject once trapped and traumatized within an oedipal colonization, can only be cured through the catharsis of revolutionary violence.”³⁰

Either way of understanding Fanon’s disavowal or reformulation of the Oedipus complex, as Counihan on the one hand, and Goff and Michael on the other, suggest, compels us to question any suggestion of a relegation of the psychoanalytical in Fanon’s theory. It becomes possible to conclude, then, that Robinson’s critique is strongest only when he specifically targets the sort of “self-referential” academic debates of colonial discourse that seek to turn Fanon into a mere text. As well as when he rails against the tendency of that discursive practice to revel in “a literature of psycho-sexual complicity between the colonised and the colonisers, which spatially

³⁰ Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson, *Crossroads in the Black Aegean: Oedipus, Antigone, and Dramas of the African Diaspora* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 99-100.

and temporally domesticates all social theory, and whose mechanics recognise no voice more authentic than their own.”³¹ But it need not be stated that the aims of academics, ensconced in the ivory tower and expounding the destabilising power of the sign and all signifying practices, are necessarily different from those of Fanon, a revolutionary who writes from a war front in the imperial periphery for whom “psychiatry had a political goal,” and who never lost sight of the fused trajectory of individual and political rights—of the fact that “individual alienation and political alienation are ... the product of social, political, and cultural conditions that must be transformed.”³² For Fanon, madness and the various manifestations of Negro psychopathology constitute an obstacle to total liberation and freedom, hence his life-long commitment to the psychoanalytic approach. And it is when read psycho-socially that we may feel the need to join Diana Fuss in pointing to the obvious fact that the psychiatric hospital of Blida-Joinville was for Fanon “a site of active resistance to the violence of the colonialist enterprise.”³³

I should reiterate that my overall concern here is not whether Fanon’s preoccupation with the psychoanalytical dimension of the struggle by the colonised to reclaim her identity is secondary—though from all I have said so far it isn’t and it seems clear Fanon had a dialectical process in mind—and so to that extent a diversion from the primary battle waged on the socio-economic front. I am rather

³¹ Cedric Robinson, “The Appropriation of Frantz Fanon,” 88.

³² François Vergès, “Chains of Madness, Chains of Colonialism: Fanon and Freedom” in *The Fact of Blackness*, 62 and 49 respectively.

³³ Diana Fuss, “Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification,” *Diacritics* 24. 2-3 (Summer-Autumn 1994): 20-42, at 36.

concerned to argue that the psychic dimension of postcoloniality, whatever significance we might wish to allot to it, remains crucial to any struggle for the *total* liberation of the colonised. For the same reason, it matters little if at all for my purposes whether or not Gates is right that “the ‘disciplinary enclave’ of anti-imperialist discourse, with which he associates the colonial paradigm, has “proved a last bastion” of global theory, and that therefore there is a need now to abandon it for a more aleatory system, such as psychoanalysis promises. For the postcolonial subject, I believe, the (neo-)colonial paradigm frames every discourse of recuperation and self-fashioning, the excesses of global theorists notwithstanding. We are, I think, far from having exhausted the issues of power and position, despite the interpellative address of globalisation to every nook and cranny of a plainly unequal world. Classical colonialism and today’s global neo-colonialism urge us never to lose sight of the morphed mechanisms of power and position—demands, I would venture, that we persist in “foregrounding” that dynamic rather than “question its ascendance in literary and cultural studies.”³⁴ The successful attempt at such a project must necessarily retain a global discursive vision to be an effective “answering dialectic,” as Aijaz Ahmad argues in a slightly different but related context,³⁵ and Fanon who famously insists that it

³⁴ Henry Louis Gates, “Critical Fanonism,” 469.

³⁵ See Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (New York: Verso, 1992), 316-17. Ahmad makes this claim while arguing against the “three worlds” categorisation of the world and for one “hierarchically structured” world. The answering dialectic to such a world’s “broader and transnational sweep,” he asserts, “must also be global and universalist in character.” Ahmad gives a Fanonian explanation for his suggestion. To the extent, he argues, that “contemporary imperialism’s political system takes the form of a hierarchically structured system of

is “at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows” is merely being consistent in locating

nation-states, it is only by organizing their struggles within the political space of their own nation-states with the revolutionary transformation of that particular nation-state as the immediate practical objective, that the revolutionary forces of any given country can effectively struggle against the imperialism they face concretely in their own lives.” Although Gates makes an effort to be nuanced, he nevertheless appears to be more invested in the poststructuralist shibboleth of local struggles as articulated by Michel Foucault, for instance, than he manages to persuade otherwise when he concludes his essay thus:

“Do we still need global, *imperial* [my emphasis] theory—in this case, a grand unified theory of oppression; or, indeed, even the whole universalizing model of Theory that it presupposes, a model of total theory that quests for finality and an exclusive lien on the last word? It’s no longer any scandal that our own theoretical reflections must be as provisional, reactive, and local as the texts we reflect upon.”

As I have mentioned above, theory need not be imperialist in its claims in order to be of universal application—universal in terms of its reference or ultimate horizon of meaning. Gates echoes Foucault’s argument in “Truth and Power” where he proposes local struggles or intellectual specificity as the model of struggle while at the same time appearing not to be disavowing universalism. I take as an instance Foucault’s response to a question on the usefulness of his preoccupation with the unmasking of power “to everyday political struggles,” and the implications of his advocacy of local and specific confrontation with power for the intellectual who must, as a result, cease to function “as the bringer of truth.” Foucault proposes the idea of “the ‘specific’ intellectual as opposed to the ‘universal’ intellectual,” though he also adds, curiously, that “we are now at a point where the function of the specific intellectual needs to be reconsidered.” Quickly, however, he says that this function is only to be “Reconsidered but not abandoned, despite the nostalgia of some of the great ‘universal’ intellectuals and the desire for a new philosophy, a new world-view.” Foucault, as Gates, keeps the door of internationalism, or universalism if you will, open by maintaining that what is to be taken into account in the intellectual is not “the bearer of universal values” but “the person occupying a specific position” who by such specificity is “linked, in a society like ours, to the general functioning of an apparatus of truth.” Foucault then defines one strand of the intellectual’s specificity as that “of the politics of truth in our societies,” not failing to add that “it is with this last factor that his [the specific intellectual’s] position can take on a general significance and that his local, specific struggle can have effects and implications which are not simply professional or sectoral.” See Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, Colin Gordon, ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 126-132.

his theory of radical decolonisation at the intersection of anti-imperialism and psychoanalysis. As Diana Fuss points out, this choice gave Fanon “a vocabulary and an intellectual framework in which to diagnose and treat not only the psychological disorders produced in individuals by the violence of colonial domination but also the neurotic structure of [post]colonialism itself.”³⁶ It is, indeed, the entire edifice of colonialism itself, as universal as the phenomenon was and remains now under the sign of neo-colonial globalisation, that Fanon subjects to scrutiny. The result is that Fanon’s work is unambiguously situated within the historical and political frame defined by imperialism—or, to follow Stuart Hall, “framed throughout by the dichotomous and manichean structure of racism as a binary system of representation and power.”³⁷ The scope of this project necessarily involves ambiguity and ambivalence, paradox and profound complexities that belie the schematic binarism which never goes beyond the surface of Fanon’s radical critique of not only colonialism but also the post-independence nation-state. Thus, when Gates goes on to mention the “exceptional instability of Fanon’s own rhetoric,” he is pointing to what Fuss has described as the “critical faultlines” upon which Fanon based his work—that is, precisely in “the linkages and fissures, the contradictions and coimplications, the translations and transformations of the theory-politics relation.”³⁸ These are the fruitful contradictions and complexities that anyone willing to embrace them,

³⁶ Diana Fuss, “Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification,” 20. My square brackets.

³⁷ Stuart Hall, “The After-Life of Frantz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why Now? Why *Black Skin, White Masks*?” in *The Fact of Blackness*, 18.

³⁸ Diana Fuss, “Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification,” 39.

as Gates himself seems to admit, will recognise as “fated to rehearse the agonisms of a culture that may never earn the title of postcolonial.”³⁹ In other words, that is bound to the colonial paradigm as its ideological and discursive sponsor. In the address Fanon delivered to the second Congress of Black Writers and Artists” in 1959, later published as “On National Culture” in *The Wretched of the Earth*, he made the following trenchant remark as part of his critique of Negritude or a romanticised idea of the past to which the colonized returns in search of a so-called authentic being:

It is not enough to try to get back to the people in that past out of which they have already emerged; rather we must join them in that fluctuating movement which they are just giving a shape to, and which, as soon as it has started, will be the signal for everything to be called into question. Let there be no mistake about it; it is to this zone of occult instability where the people dwell that we must come; and it is there that our souls are crystallized and that our perceptions and our lives are transfused with light.⁴⁰

By the phrase, “occult instability,” Fanon adroitly merges the psychological and political trajectories of his revolutionary anti-colonial poetics. I equate this zone, where Fanon believes the oppressed people dwell and their souls are crystallised, where we must come to do any meaningful work of reconstituting the fragmented

³⁹ Henry Louis Gates, “Critical Fanonism,” 469 and 460; emphasis original.

⁴⁰ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 227.

subject and of national liberation, with the realm of post-colonial trauma. All the dictionary meanings of “occult” evoke the impact of a catastrophic historical event to the psyche of its victims, the subject of *Black Skin, White Masks*. The occult, if we must spell it out, suggests not only the supernatural but also that which is not easily apprehended or understood—indeed, that which is concealed or occluded from us under normal modes of enquiry.

In returning to Fanon for a psychoanalytical exploration of the (post)colonial problem, therefore, I ask myself the same questions that several of his most sensitive readers have asked, among them Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha. Questions, I believe, that are inevitably spurred by another question, posed by Fanon no less, when he says that the colonised subject is always compelled to doubt the reality of his or her existence. In other words, it proceeds from an acknowledgement of the fact that the extreme experience of trauma creates a “radically altered” sense of self. The struggle of the postcolonial subject to recover her identity is, then, quite literally, a struggle to reconcile the fragments of a divided and alienated self. But it is not a struggle to recover an intact identity of the pre-traumatised self. Rather, it is reminiscent of that fraught struggle to merge the “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings” which, as W. E. B. Du Bois memorably puts it, constitute “two warring ideals”⁴¹ in the body of the colonised subject. It is precisely what Lifton sees as the task of reintegrating the traumatised self into the pre-traumatised one, itself

⁴¹ See W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Norton Critical Edition, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Terri Hume Oliver (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 11.

“a form of doubling in the traumatised person.”⁴² And this is where psychoanalysis, as Fanon so presciently foresaw, becomes the cultural theorists and critic’s best ally for the project of reclaiming postcolonial identities still under siege even now. Hall asks, “Why Fanon? Why Now? Why *Black Skin, White Masks*?” And Bhabha who, perhaps more than any other postcolonial theorist, has done the most to launch the avalanche of discursive interest in Fanon⁴³ poses several rhetorical questions in a similar vein as Hall: “Why invoke Frantz Fanon today, quite out of historical context? Why invoke Fanon when the ardour of emancipatory discourse has seemingly yielded to the fervent, ferocious pleas for the ‘end of history’, the end of struggle? Why invoke Fanon who spoke most pertinently and passionately at that historical moment when, as he argued, it was a question of the Third world starting a new history of Man?”⁴⁴ Hall presents, I think, a compelling argument for remembering and returning to the psychoanalytic Fanon, who also was always the unwaveringly political Fanon. Indeed all the renewed interest in Fanon, especially its passion and intensity, seems to be almost wholly around the first work he produced at the slender age of twenty-six. Hall believes that this has something to do with the “over-determined return of the repressed.” And if the return of the

⁴² Cathy Caruth, “An Interview with Robert Jay Lifton” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 137.

⁴³ As even a glance at the index to *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2004) will show, Fanon is the Third World discursive deity that presides over that often-cited contribution to postcolonial theory, a view that would be corroborated by two important essays not collected in that volume: “Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition” in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, 112-123 and “Day by Day ... with Frantz Fanon” in *The Fact of Blackness*, 186-205.

⁴⁴ Homi Bhabha, “Day by Day ... with Frantz Fanon” in *The Fact of Blackness*, 188.

repressed presents the trauma victim the opportunity to grapple with her ordeal, to confront at last, the demons that have shattered her sense of self and reality, then it was about time, I say, we turned to *Black Skin, White Masks* and “Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders.” For how many postcolonial wars—from Biafra and Liberia to Somalia and Rwanda, Congo and Sierra Leone to Angola and Sudan—have been fought by the “independent” nations hurriedly cobbled together and thrust upon the people by the departing colonisers? Hall distils several other reasons from the contributors to the retrospective work, *The Fact of Blackness*, why this turn is needed, but I would like to quote him in support of the view that I express at the beginning: that in doing so we look for the “true,” authentic, revolutionary or allegedly “mature” Fanon to our peril:

Rather than trying to recapture the “true” Fanon, we must try to engage the after-life of Frantz Fanon – that which Jacques Derrida would call, following his recent essay on Marx, his “spectral effect” ... in ways that do not simply restore the past in a cycle of the eternal return, but which will bring the enigma of Fanon, as Benjamin said of history, flashing up before us at a moment of danger. “The colonial man who writes for his people,” – that is, of course, colonial man and woman, an elision in Fanon which is as characteristic as it is untimely – “ought to use the past with the intention of opening the future,” Fanon observed, “an invitation to an action and a basis of hope.”⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Stuart Hall, “The After-Life of Frantz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why Now? Why *Black Skin, White Masks*?” in *The Fact of Blackness*, 13-37; all quotations at 14.

Bhabha is in agreement with Hall on the futility of searching for the “mythical” Fanon, a figure who can “either be revered as the prophetic spirit of Third World Liberation or reviled as an exterminating angel, the inspiration to violence.” Bhabha thinks that Fanon “speaks most effectively from the uncertain interstices of historical change ... the area of ambivalence between race and sexuality; out of an unresolved contradiction between culture and class; from deep within the struggle of psychic representation and social reality.”⁴⁶ I am most in agreement with Bhabha, however, on the reason that he pays the least attention to in his sustained effort at making Fanon speak to our times but which is expressed in that phrase, “deep within the struggle of psychic representation and social reality.” For although Bhabha rightly deplores the “piety” that subtends the search for the authentic Fanon, he launches a different and no less objectionable search of his own aptly described by Gates as a “coaxing devotion” aimed at “cloning” one more Third World poststructuralist from Fanon’s theory; arduous labour that causes him to “regret aloud those moments in Fanon that cannot be reconciled to the post-structuralist critique of identity.”⁴⁷

Gates is not alone in expressing discontent about the problematic aspects of Bhabha’s otherwise impressive work of reinterpreting and thereby reinserting Fanon back into the heart of postcolonial discourse. In the essay, “Cultural Criticism in Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*,” Olakunle George, while adopting Bhabha’s notions of hybridity and ambivalence for his

⁴⁶ Homi Bhabha, “Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition” in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*, 113.

⁴⁷ Henry Louis Gates, “Critical Fanonism,” 460.

analysis is nonetheless very critical of Bhabha's tendency to mistake theoretical for political goals. Bhabha's deployment of a critical vocabulary that is primarily psychoanalytical but which has a particular "fondness for the rhythm of words" leads him "squarely onto the level of the socio-political," George asserts. Consequently, there is in Bhabha a "conflation of the psychic terrain with the socio-political, even as his own premises would seem to suggest that such a conflation is conceptually problematic." Too often, George says, following Robert Young, Bhabha "celebrates the subversive indeterminacies of psychic processes"—which, I hasten to add, may be manifestations of historical traumas that are yet to be worked-out and so in their acting-out forms—as if they “translate into politico-historical upheavals.” In other words, Bhabha's formulation of “mimicry as menace to the colonialist psyche” is theoretically lofted to the level of “a specifically ‘revolutionary’ insurgency.”⁴⁸ A clear source of this problem of blurring the terrains of the psychological and the socio-political is no doubt Bhabha's investment in the poststructuralist reification of the instability of the sign and meaning, the shibboleth of linguistic theories of literature and culture that follow the Saussurean line.⁴⁹ Bhabha's poststructuralism obliges him to be

⁴⁸ Olakunle George, “Cultural Criticism in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*,” *Representations*, No. 67 (Summer, 1999), 67-91, at 80.

⁴⁹ Needless to say, I am referring to the all-important place that the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, occupies in the emergence of post-structuralism and the centrality of Derrida's deconstruction to that framework. Saussure's expostulation of a system whereby meaning can be made in language only by a differential relation of one sound or phoneme to another—putting it in the most general way—was famously elaborated by Derrida as *différance*, a term that Jonathan Culler asserts, “determines and subverts every theory of meaning.” As a discursive formation, then, such literary or social theories beholden to the Saussurean school of thought

content to assign his main discursive categories of paradox, contradiction, ambivalence and hybridity to the linguistic register where the instability of the sign allegedly reigns supreme like an implacable god. As a result, Bhabha tends to read for “moments of linguistic self-contradiction.” The political project, the teleology, powering this manner of reading is that “textuality defeats mastery and totalization,”⁵⁰ and not surprisingly, Bhabha claims—in that passage from “Remembering Fanon” already cited above—that one of the reasons why we must turn to Fanon now is because he is “the purveyor of the transgressive and transitional truth.”⁵¹ Thus, at too many enthusiastic moments, George points out, Bhabha “substitutes lyricism for persuasion.” Commenting on Bhabha’s use of lines from two Bombay poets to support his claim about the radical otherness of the postcolonial text, George notes “little substantive genealogy or discursive pedigree,” such that Bhabha seems to summon postcolonial texts “to fill a slot in his discourse that the particular context of the argument demands.” Bhabha’s primary interest, George believes, is

valourise the instability of signs and meanings. From this premise, they go on to propound the inability of any system of signification to explain reality. The result is a radical epistemological scepticism that is content with the ability to uncover in any given text a non-hierarchical plurality of meanings, none of which is more or less accurate. More often than not, this leads to a tendency to equate the achieved subversion of hierarchy and the order of conventional truths and meanings, or normativity, through a deconstructive reading with a political victory. I have relied on Jonathan Culler’s *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982) for the account I have given of Saussure’s influence on the post-structuralist movement; in particular, Chapter Two, entitled simply, “Deconstruction.”

⁵⁰ Olakunle George, “Cultural Criticism in Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*,” *Representations*, 69-70.

⁵¹ Homi Bhabha, “Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, 113.

“the contest of theories within Anglo-American cultural criticism,” a factor that leads him to make the postcolonial text enter the field merely “as a passive witness ... a hired hitman.” This, George argues, has the unhappy result of making Bhabha’s theory stand at several critical moments as “the index of an unthematized tension.” To avoid this limitation, George proposes what I would call, for want of a better term, the commonsense approach: taking postcolonial texts “on their own terms ... in the fullness of their own contents and tensions,” thereby letting them “speak to critical theory” rather than the other way round. This way, postcolonial texts become historicised as cultural artifices made by humans in specific social conditions “to make sense of history, to get a handle on their insecurities in modernity.”

To the extent it is true that Bhabha, Fanon’s most energetic interpreter in contemporary postcolonial theory, conflates the psychic and the socio-political, one might argue that this is not a bad thing if the intention is an attempt to “bring together” or “fuse” the two realms of cause and effect for a better understanding of postcolonial trauma. This correctly grasped but unexplained relation between the two dimensions of the colonial experience constitutes, I think, what George identifies as an unthematized tension and a limitation of Bhabha’s theory. But George himself shies away from taking up the gauntlet of a psychological exploration of this problem. “It is not my intention,” he says, “to open the debate as to whether or not psychoanalysis can lay claim to being a theory of society.” George abdicates this role because he believes that the “differential social relations” of postcolonial

subjects which explain their “paradoxes of identity” can be specified “only on the terrain of a materialist consideration” (80). In my reading of *Horseman*—as well as my other primary texts, Morrison’s *Beloved* and Walcott’s *Omeros*—however, I show that George cannot be *absolutely* right on this point. I use the word “absolutely” advisedly for a reason that becomes clear below. In my analyses, I show differential social relations even within a regime of the same oppression through a psychological reading of these works along the lines of the sociodiagnostic model of psychoanalysis that Fanon advocates. George implies that the task of exploring how the psychoanalytic can also be materialist—which is how it can give a good account of the social—is unnecessary, thereby unwittingly aligning himself with Robinson’s polemical view that the psychological is discursively subservient to the political. But what this does is to leave the psychic dimension of the postcolonial predicament, which unquestionably has the power of “overdetermining” the subject’s agential capacity, well alone in the discursive unconscious or repressed of theory. Yet we cannot hope to re-launch the arrested struggle of decolonisation with subjects who remain victims, to varying degrees, of the post-traumatic stress syndrome arising from the colossal betrayal of independence. It is fair to say that most African countries today are in a state of total war, civil or economic—or, at the very least, in a state of permanent emergency. The sheer number of actual shooting wars that have raged on the continent since the Biafran war in Nigeria just six years after independence to the current battlefront in Darfur-Sudan is mind-boggling. But whether hot or cold—though the economic wars have

never seemed to cool—they have inflicted and continue to inflict massive traumas that repeat the unhealed psychic wounds of colonialism. Fanon tenders compelling evidence of how subversive of identity and political agency “the atmosphere of war” can be by compiling clinical details of victims traumatised by the Algerian war of liberation in the closing chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*. As Fanon shows, even the colonisers were themselves traumatised and if we substitute the home-grown despots, so-called leaders of the beleaguered post-colonial nations, for the erstwhile colonisers, then we see even more clearly why total disalienation enjoins on the postcolonial critic the psychological imperative. For, as insightful as George is in his essay, his unwillingness to pursue this line of enquiry marks his own limitation to the extent that the critique of Bhabha he mounts does not engage him at the most crucial nexus of his reinterpretation of Fanon: the psychoanalytical. Yet, that this is vital to any goal of surpassing Bhabha’s theory⁵² or transcending the kind of “schematic” Marxist-materialist criticism that George critiqued is indicated by the marked—because repeated—presence of the word “trauma” in his essay.⁵³

Let me be clear. A great deal has been gained and can still be gained from the sort of sophisticated historico-materialist approach to the postcolonial text that George urges, but it seems to me that at this juncture postcolonial theory stands to gain even more by delving into

⁵² Olakunle George, “Cultural Criticism in Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*,” *Representations*, 80.

⁵³ I note at least three instances of this word, excluding other possible cognates or connotations. See pages 68, 87 and 88.

the occult zone of the trauma of colonialism and slavery for the project of illuminating and helping to resolve the unthematized tension that lurks there. As my argument in this dissertation shows, any claim that the materialist plane alone is enough to explain and exhaust the postcolonial debacle is comparable at some level to the sort of simplistic counter-posing of *Black Skin, White Masks* to *The Wretched of the Earth* that I noted earlier. As Hall warns, an account of racism as the sustaining ideology of colonialism—that is, of the historico-racial schema—“which has no purchase on the inner landscape and the unconscious mechanisms of its effects is, at best, only half the story.”⁵⁴ George’s unwillingness to keep his insightful eye on the other half of the problem of postcolonial literary self-representation also ends up, then, under-serving his specific goal of re-examining Soyinka’s acclaimed *magnum opus* for the theoretical relevance it has for contemporary theory and criticism. Ultimately, George’s dogmatic insistence on “the terrain of the materialist” from the outset leads him to an unintended renunciation of that stance when he admits at the end of his essay that the kind of attention the play requires is one that honours the “multiple levels” at which it “thrashes out the problems that constitute its object.” Between the initial claim and the later admission lies the repression, in effect, of other modes of examining the problem of postcolonial modernity. It would seem George believes that the psychoanalytic does not constitute one of the multiple levels of discourse he rightly sees as indispensable for an exhaustive reading of the postcolonial text. But if *Horseman*, as he aptly observes, “invites

⁵⁴ Stuart Hall, “The After-life of Frantz Fanon” in *The Fact of Blackness*, 17.

us further into itself and rewards us there,”⁵⁵ my contention is that this mindscape, this interior setting of the play—akin to the inside place that *Beloved* imperiously summons Paul D to touch in Morrison’s eponymously named novel— is constituted by the trauma of individual and collective experience of colonialism and its aftermath. Soyinka dramatises this trauma at the cataclysmic moment of contact between the indigenous community or nation and the coloniser. That the play obliges us to step, without staying our feet like Elesin, into the psychic gulf of transition and disintegration for the primary mode of laying hold of its “truth” seems even more evident in the light of Soyinka’s famous essay, “The Fourth Stage,” which I have also drawn upon in my discussion. My claim is that the awful foreboding so palpably expressed by Soyinka about a world wrenched from its true course and smashed against alien boulders, leaving its inhabitants floundering in an ominous void, aptly names postcolonial trauma as the chthonic realm deep within which the play’s driving impetus is located. Consequently, the terrain for advancing our analysis and understanding of *Horseman*, as many a postcolonial text, must, therefore, be widened to give central place to the psychoanalytic paradigm as I hope to have done specifically in Chapter Two, and with regard to my other primary texts, below.

Needless to say, the task of elucidating the psychic dimension of the postcolonial condition is, to put it mildly, a difficult one. For if trauma by definition is a cataclysmic event that shatters the individual

⁵⁵ Olakunle George, “Cultural Criticism in Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*,” 88-89.

or collective's prior frame of reference,⁵⁶ how can we specify the social referents of traumatic experience—what Cathy Caruth calls the “locus of referentiality?”⁵⁷ Ultimately, the problem of reference emerges as the unresolved tension of theoretical formulations that seek to relate the trauma of colonialism to the social reality of lived experience in the postcolony. And because of the formidable problems posed to the critic who attempts this task, the tendency exists to stay within the “empiricist” frame provided by materialist criticism. We can, after all, identify the social location of the postcolonial subject with relative accuracy, but how can we even begin to unveil the unconscious mechanisms that can determine agency from that social location, and, further, explain the referential link between psyche and society? Yet the truth is that a psychoanalytic procedure inexorably refers us to the exterior world of experience, a space in the postcolony riddled by the original and trans-generational traumas of colonialism. But it does so while also keeping us focussed on the interior world of the traumatised. In other words, a psychoanalytic interpretation of the postcolonial problem is invariably a Janus-face methodology that compels us to look both inwards and outwards at one and the same time, and this seems to me the only way to keep both the wood and the trees, together with the goblins that dwell therein, simultaneously

⁵⁶ Freud gives the definition of trauma from the psychoanalytic perspective in *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage, 1955) that informs its current use. There, he likens trauma to the experience of the victim of a catastrophic train collision and also elaborates the concept of latency or belatedness. See also Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 3-4, and Caruth, “Introduction” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 151-157.

⁵⁷ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 6.

in view. Indeed, Fanon's description of this traumatic experience as "the fact of blackness" proves again the genius of his radical insight into the dynamic of individual-cum-collective consciousness and its historical determinant. After all, nothing presumably bespeaks objectivity, the truth of experience in a lived or worldly way, more than facts. To speak of a particular psyche, private or communal, and the trauma-inducing facts that cause it to apprehend and respond to social stimuli in ways that are often confounding and determinant of an enabling agency is to acknowledge that our work of social analysis, of interpreting the world, can hardly be done on the materialist or any one discursive plane alone.

That said, however, it is possible to claim that the psychoanalytic paradigm, in particular, Fanon's sociodiagnostic model of it, has a special advantage and appeal in that it is also a rigidly materialist framework. Thus, if I have followed a mostly psychological line of analysis, it is because I agree with Harold Bloom when, in defence of Freud, he says that to be a good psychoanalyst is to be "a good materialist,"⁵⁸ and it goes without saying that to be a good materialist is to be a good realist. This claim, on one level, would seem self-evident since the postcolonial subject is always mind-and-matter, so to speak, in every concrete historical situation that acts upon him or her and which in turn impels him or her to action. The return to the psychological becomes, to my mind, a more powerful argument for relocating the postcolonial subject to the heart of the quest for agency

⁵⁸ Harold Bloom, "Freud: Frontier Concepts, Jewishness, and Interpretation" in Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 113.

and self-fashioning in the wake of colonialism's denial, or radical fragmentation, of a self-constituting agency to the colonised. This is the all-important question of will, Soyinka's self-apprehension, that is at the heart of the conflict he so powerfully dramatises in *Horseman*. But the goal of reclaiming identities battered by colonialism, of re-establishing connections to broken communal epistemologies, and of reconstituting agency cannot be fully realised without taking up that very task that the postcolonial critic often shies away from: pursuing the nature and varying forms of the postcolonial subject's psychic alienation and aggression, including, but not limited to, self-loathing and self-doubt, madness, gratuitous violence, power lust, mind-boggling treasury looting⁵⁹ and "fratricidal combats" whose barbarity mime and exceed the bestialities of "war"—what constitutes, in short, the riddling "neurotic structure of [post]colonialism itself," as Fuss

⁵⁹ This might appear to be a suspicious entry on this list, but the recent call by Mrs Farida Waziri, a retired police commissioner and chairperson of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission of Nigeria, a body saddled with the losing battle of checking official corruption, to the effect that public office holders should be subjected to psychiatric tests to determine their suitability for office—in other words, to ascertain if they would not loot the treasury—justifies its inclusion. In a keynote address she gave to a workshop on transparency and accountability in public office, Waziri said as follows:

"Having dealt with many corruption cases, I am inclined to suggest that public officers should be subjected to some form of psychiatric evaluation to determine their suitability for public office. The extent of aggrandizement and gluttonous accumulation of wealth that I have observed suggest to me that some people are mentally and psychologically unsuitable for public office. We have observed people amassing public wealth to a point suggesting 'madness' or some form of obsessive-compulsive psychiatric disorder."

See, "EFCC Wants Psychiatric Tests for Politicians," *Daily Champion*, 29 September 2009. It should be pointed out that this is not a novel call, as Soyinka, one of the authors discussed here, has long urged a psychiatric evaluation of African leaders on account of their marked depravity bordering on the neurotic, including the mindless pillaging of their nations' treasuries, a theme he has indirectly treated in several of his other plays, among them *Madmen and Specialists* (1970), *Opera Wonyosi* (1977), *A Play of Giants* (1984), and more recently, *King Baabu* (2002).

names it. At the very least, we must acknowledge that the historical trauma caused by the fact of colonialism—or, if you insist, “the fact of blackness” and so of being marked as a colonial subject—created a radically altered sense of self for the colonised and causes the postcolonial subject even now to pose to him- or herself, consciously or unconsciously, the question, “In reality, who am I?”

The factual, lived world of the anomalies of affect caused by post-colonial trauma is where Bhabha, following Fanon, enjoins us to go in search of answers to the postcolonial predicament. In “Day by Day ... with Fanon,” Bhabha, dismisses several rhetorical questions that may be raised to query the relevance of invoking Fanon today and denounces the “piety” that informs them on the ground that they miss the significance of the quotidian in Fanon’s theoretical framework. Because Bhabha makes his claim with copious citations from Fanon, I will quote the passage at some length:

Such piety misses the subtlety and the power of Fanon’s rhetorical emphasis on the singularity of the *day-to-day* – the diurnal measure – in both struggle and survival. In *Spontaneity: Its Strength and Weakness*, the understated phrase ‘the struggle continues’, offers an elusive attempt to distinguish between what he calls ‘the historical law’, and his sense of the performance of the politics of the day-to-day: ‘the struggle for national liberation does not consist in spanning the gap at one stride: the drama has to be played out in all of its difficulty everyday ... Day after day goes by.’ ... It is this historical temporality that I would call the *emergency of the (insurgent) everyday* ... the temporality of *everyday emergency* is that it represents the *agency* of

insurgency and constitutes a counter-force to historical exemplarity (sic). The temporality of the day-to-day is what Fanon calls the 'knowledge of the practice of action'.⁶⁰

This is not a novel thesis since Fanon is emphatic in linking the effectiveness of the psychoanalytic effort to disalienate the black subject to "an immediate recognition of social and economic realities." In other words, the historical day-to-day occurrences that work under a regime of colonialism (and neo-colonialism) to fix the inferiority and dependence of the colonised as, in Fanon's words, "a chemical solution is fixed by a dye."⁶¹ Bhabha's gloss on this everyday space that harbours the sources of postcolonial trauma and where its effects are acted-out helps to underscore the hard realism of Fanon's psychoanalysis adapted to the colonial context. This is the site of the daily regurgitation and accretion of "a thousand details, anecdotes and stories" that construct the racial epidermal schema as of the daily lessons of struggle that slowly unveil to consciousness the "partial, limited and unstable" colonial truths that turn them into material forces of domination. Bringing the colonized to full consciousness or maturity in the process of the struggle for liberation requires nothing short of a "force of intellect" that "reveals unexpected facets ... brings out new meanings and pinpoints contradictions" camouflaged by the purported facts of blackness. What, in effect, constitutes "knowledge of the practice of action." A major argument of this dissertation is that

⁶⁰ Homi Bhabha, "Day by Day ... With Fanon" in *The Fact of Blackness*, 188; italics and brackets original.

⁶¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 109.

the political unconscious created by the repressed trauma of colonialism stands as a formidable obstacle to the postcolonial subject's will and agency. What true knowledge of the practice of action can we expect then if the psychological is given short shrift either because of a certain atavistic fear, even by "those inside the movement," as Fanon notes, "who tend to think that shades of meaning constitute dangers and drive wedges into the solid block of popular opinion"⁶² or by social theories which suggest that the battle can be engaged and won entirely on one front? If we note how oddly remarkable it is that the sociodiagnostic psychoanalysis that Fanon insists upon as a revolutionary imperative has until the fresh awakening to *Black Skin, White Masks* been literally ignored, one wonders if this lacuna is not attributable to the anxiety which he aptly recognised. After all, the psychoanalytic approach can promise only "shades of meaning," partially illumined insights into impulses hidden deep in the unconscious. Whatever the reason may be, it is clear that this place where alienation and ambivalence are tied into a tight psychic knot is one "many 'right-on' critics are determined to avoid,"⁶³ as Hall points out. Or as Dambudzo Marechera, that enfant terrible of African literature who died an untimely and tragic death in 1987, wondered: "How can Africa write as if that Black Frenchman, Frantz Fanon, never existed—I refer to the Fanon of *Black Skin, White*

⁶² Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 146-47.

⁶³ Stuart Hall, "The After Life of Frantz Fanon" in *The Fact of Blackness*, 35.

Masks.”⁶⁴ Marechera was speaking of writers, but he might very well have had the critics in mind.

But the postcolonial critic cannot put this task off any longer. There is a way to draw out of Fanon that knowledge of the practice of action informed by the everyday of today and “lay hold of the violence which is changing direction”⁶⁵ just as the sources of the trauma that drive it morph, often unrecognisably, posing afresh the difficult problem of how to work out the relation between psyche and society, the unconscious dimension of repressed traumatic experiences and their historical causes. But this is where the return to *Black Skin, White Masks* is most helpful to postcolonial theory. For Hall, the psychoanalytic Fanon is necessary for subverting “the structures of ‘othering’ in language and representation, image, sound and discourse.” With the example of the strategic use of Fanon by minority artists and thinkers whose work focuses on the technologies and structures of race, representation and a radical identity politics, Hall finds that this Fanon is crucial to any strategy aimed at overturning “the mechanisms of fixed racial signification” and turning them against themselves “in order to begin to constitute new subjectivities, new positions of enunciation and identification, without which the

⁶⁴ Dambudzo Marechera, “The African Writer’s Experience of European Literature,” *Zambezia* (1987), xiv, (ii), 99-105, at 100. As this journal may be a bit obscure, it might be useful to refer to the editor’s note which explains that this was one of two talks—the other being “Soyinka, Dostoevsky: The Writer on Trial for his Time”—given by Marechera in Harare on 15 and 29 October 1986, roughly a year before his death on 18 August 1987, as part of a series of lectures organized by the Zimbabwe German Society, the Alliance Française, and the British Council.

⁶⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 58.

most ‘revolutionary’ moments of national liberation quickly slide into their post-colonial reverse gear.”⁶⁶ But in doing so we are also confronted with what Hall has called the enigma of Fanon, that element which presents him as transfixed by the rigid binary of white/black, coloniser/colonised, self/other at the same time that he is lusciously open to “the linkages and fissures, the contradictions and coimplications, the translations and transformations” which the day-to-day of colonial experience and struggle make bare. Two quick and obvious indications of Fanon’s complexity can be mentioned here. How often, for instance, do those critics whose essentialist inclinations cause them to apotheosise the “revolutionary” Fanon note the “shaded meaning” of this demurral in *The Wretched of the Earth*:

The settler is not simply the man who must be killed. Many members of the mass of colonialists reveal themselves to be much, much nearer to the national struggle than certain sons of the nation. The barriers of blood and race-prejudice are broken down on both sides. In the same way, not every Negro or Moslem is issued automatically a hallmark of genuineness; and the gun or the knife is not inevitably reached for when a settler makes his appearance.⁶⁷

The second moment, again randomly chosen, which displays Fanon’s open celebration of contradiction is his “Letter to the Resident Minister” of Algeria by which he resigned in protest from his post as

⁶⁶ Stuart Hall, “The After-life of Frantz Fanon” in *The Fact of Blackness*, 19-20.

⁶⁷ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 146.

resident psychiatrist at the Blida-Joinville hospital in 1956. We must remember that the hospital was more than a doctor's clinic for Fanon, constituting as it did for him a revolutionary front in itself—the place where he was more directly in touch with the wounded and traumatised victims of the war of liberation, white and black. He had, then, to have the most compelling political reason to resign from his work there, which is why it is truly remarkable that he justifies his action by citing the important role of the psychoanalytic, of psychiatric medicine, for reconciling the alienated colonial subject to herself and her environment:

Madness is one of the means man has of losing his freedom. And I can say, on the basis of what I have been able to observe from this point of vantage, that the degree of alienation of the inhabitants of this country appears to me frightening.

If psychiatry is the medical technique that aims to enable man no longer to be a stranger to his environment, I owe it to myself to affirm that the Arab, permanently an alien in his own country, lives in a state of absolute depersonalization.”⁶⁸

Diana Fuss and Stuart Hall are in agreement that Fanon's location of his discursive and political work of decolonisation in this crucial nexus of the psychopathology of colonialism is as prescient as it is radical. According to Hall, this constitutes the novelty, originality and timeliness of Fanon. This note of timeliness leads inevitably to the question of how to read and apply Fanon's theory today, especially in

⁶⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, 52-53.

the light of its many avowals and disavowals, the fissures and slippages that mark his attempt to grapple with the unconscious structure of racism and colonialism. I do not pretend to have found the definitive answer to this question and set myself a much narrower task: taking seriously Fanon's insistence on a sociodiagnostic approach for a "psychoanalytical interpretation" of the postcolonial problem in my primary texts. Implicit in such an approach, which, I hasten to add, must be mediated by a realist theory of reference, is the political question of how to end the pathological condition imposed by colonialism on the colonised subject. If, as Hall observes, the whole thrust of Bhabha's theory is the placid acceptance of "a politics of subversion which lives with ambivalence, without trying to transcend or sublimate it," the aim for me is Fanonian in the true sense of liberation, which demands transcendence and sublation. Bhabha's discursive stance is, as Hall explains it, a political consequence of "a Lacanian theoretical position, where ambivalence is a necessary part of the script." As Hall notes, however, it is the ambivalence that "kills"⁶⁹—in the literal and symbolic senses—and I endeavour to show this in my analyses, as indeed the fates of Elesin and the Yoruba nation, Sethe and Paul D, Philoctete, Major Plunkett and Ma Kilman illustrate. In this, I am also guided by Fuss's realist reading of the Fanonian project: that "the political is located within the psychical as a powerful shaping force," and vice versa. Or, put another way—with a turn on Lacan's well-known notion that the unconscious is structured like a language—that "the psychical operates precisely as a political

⁶⁹ Stuart Hall, "The After-life of Frantz Fanon" in *The Fact of Blackness*, 27.

formation,” a discovery that Fuss sees as one of Fanon’s “most important contribution to political thought.” For Fanon, Fuss concludes, gives us a politics—an interpretative paradigm—that does not “oppose the psychical but fundamentally presupposes it.”⁷⁰

If this is the case, then it is clear why Bhabha’s or any other post-structuralist or deconstructivist approach fails to go beyond ambivalence and indeterminacy and ends up content to substitute “the subversion which lives with ambivalence” for an adequate political goal, often achieved through a mostly linguistic parsing of the postcolonial text. To make colonial trauma together with the compulsion to repeat in the face of newly inflicted wounds in the postcolonial nation refer outwards to its historical sources, the critic must be armed with an adequate theory of linguistic reference. For the tendency that Hall and George observe with regard to Bhabha is not limited to the Third World poststructuralist, as my discussion in Chapter Three of Cathy Caruth’s effort to develop such a theory in “The Falling Body and the Impact of Reference” shows. Caruth falls short of her goal of disavowing, through the work of Paul de Man, the inclination by linguistically oriented theorists of literature to deny the role of reference in the text and thereby denying “the possibility that language can give us access to history.”⁷¹ But if the locus of referentiality of historical trauma is the social world of lived experience, it becomes necessary to defend the cognitive value of experience, and beyond that, of trauma as a latent, or belated but

⁷⁰ Diana Fuss, “Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification,” 39.

⁷¹ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 73.

nonetheless ultimately cognisable—through a dynamic process of acting-out and working-through, of coming to terms with, the trauma—category of experience. Together, these terms—traumatic experience, belatedness or latency, acting-out and working-through, reference and realism—provide the nodes of my application of the psychoanalytic paradigm to my analysis and defence of postcolonial identity below. Subsumed under “acting-out and working-through” is the notion of healing of the postcolonial body-politic that the title of this dissertation suggests.

CHAPTER TWO

IDENTITY OR DEATH! THE TRAUMA OF LIFE AND CONTINUITY IN WOLE SOYINKA'S *DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN*

It is not by coincidence that Freud's name insinuates itself into a discussion of Soyinka; there is a deeper connection between the two thinkers' shared concern with the topography of reason, something that needs further investigation. Suffice it to say, for the time being, that in a Freudian context Soyinka can be said to be recuperating the hidden and even repressed structures underlying postcolonial modernity and letting them speak their language of pure alterity in order to reveal the existing concepts of order and structure as pragmatic resolutions of fundamentally unrelieved tensions of thought and being.

— Mpalive-Hangson Msiska¹

The confrontation in *Death and the King's Horseman* ... between Elesin and Pilkings, goes beyond a simple matching of good against evil, even beyond the contending logic of two cultural philosophies, and is meant to probe deeper into the metaphysical traumas of a society in transition, as well as the role of the committed individual in such rites of passage.

— Femi Osofisan²

¹ Mpalive-Hangson Msiska, *Postcolonial Identity in Wole Soyinka* (Amsterdam-New York: Editions Rodopi, 2007), 20.

² Femi Osofisan, "Wole Soyinka and the Living Dramatist: A Playwright's Encounter with the Drama of Wole Soyinka, in *Wole Soyinka: Freedom and Complexity*, ed. Biodun Jeyifo (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 172-186, at 183.

The very title of Wole Soyinka's most celebrated play foregrounds a wrenching psychological drama. Death, the end of life on the existential plane or of material being, has transfixed humans with its unblinking gaze from the origins of time, so much so that death has even been posited as the purpose of life itself. Yet, in all the great amount of critical commentary that *Horseman* has generated, little or nothing of substance has addressed the psychological dimensions of the riveting spectacle of the duel with death that the play presents. That this is the case amounts to something of a surprise given the early example of Frantz Fanon, a seminal figure in the constitution of postcolonial studies as a discipline, in undertaking to uncover "the anomalies of affect" resulting from the quest by imperialism for political and cultural domination of the colonized. In "The Negro and Psychopathology" where Fanon revises Freud in order to apply the fundamental premise of psychoanalysis to the African setting of the "man of color," he avers that a "normal Negro child, having grown up within a normal family, will become abnormal on the slightest contact with the white world."³ For the child, we need only substitute the adult, the native, the black man or the Negro, and for the family ethno-national community⁴ to make this observation of direct

³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 141-209, at 143.

⁴ As Hortense Spillers's reading of a little-known work—unavailable in English even, save for her working translations—has indicated, however, the family may still retain much of its primary conceptual place in psychoanalysis with appropriate symbolic substitutions to take care of the notorious African extended family system. Spillers comments on Marie-Cécile and Edmond Ortigues's *Oedipe Africain* (Paris: Éditions L'Harmattan, 1984) in "All the Things You Could Be Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother': Psychoanalysis and Race" in her *Black, White, and in Color* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 376-427.

relevance to the task of literary-cum-social analysis, as Fanon in fact does in *Black Skin, White Masks*. But Fanon's interest in this dimension of the fact of (post)colonialism did not begin with *Black Skin*; he had adumbrated it even in his most political and best known work, *The Wretched of the Earth*, where he devotes a chapter to "Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders." And we might add that it is the work that provided Jean Paul-Satre the occasion for that insightful remark, "The status of 'native' is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonized people with their consent."⁵ We may debate the extent of complicity of the colonized in bringing about (post)colonial neurosis, but that is outside the purview of this chapter whose focus is what Msiska in my first epigraph describes as "the topography of reason" as determined by the "repressed structures of postcolonial modernity." For my purposes, I restate this as the opaque dimension of knowing and not knowing and its impact on will or agential capacity, a goal I believe can be pursued with any success by excavating the realm of the unconscious together with the poetics of "pure alterity" that it compels in Soyinka's *Horseman*.

In the epoch of cross-disciplinarity, a disregard for the psychic dimension of the postcolonial condition tends to suggest that the literature of self-representation in the postcolony has nothing in common with the psychoanalytic aim of seeking to unravel the complex, often unfathomable, relations between experience and knowledge, knowing and not knowing. It may well be that I have not looked closely or widely enough, but in all that I have seen the

⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 20.

psychological aspect of the death trauma *Horseman* so stunningly lays bare is acknowledged, so to speak, only in passing. As my two epigraphs show, the tendency is to give a glancing nod to this level of signification, often by noting the traumatic history that inspires the play, and quickly move on to the seemingly more pressing questions of political and cultural criticism or, for those who come to it from the purview of linguistically-oriented theories of literature, its dazzling yet paradoxical deployment of language together with its confounding implications for a postcolonial identity politics. As far as I can tell, only Adebayo Williams in the essay, "Ritual and the Political Unconscious: The case of *Death and the King's Horseman*," comes closest to an actual examination of the traumatic dimension of the play's conflict. And Williams is so auspiciously brought to the edge of the psychological by the inherent logic of his analytical prism: Frederic Jameson's Marxian-drawn concept of the political unconscious, which itself is indebted to the psychoanalytic notions of repression and the collective unconscious. Indeed Williams invokes Freud and Carl Jung in making the intertextual argument for his analytic framework: "The idea of a political unconscious as a corollary for the collective consciousness is not a new one. Its hazy outlines can be glimpsed in the works of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. In fact, Freud's concept of repression (i.e., the specific mechanism by means of which individuals and societies alike suppress hostile and intolerable truths as a strategy for containing or postponing confrontations with reality) actually foreshadows the theory of the political unconscious."⁶

⁶ Adebayo Williams, "Ritual and the Political Unconscious: The Case of *Death and the*

Although Williams does not pursue the psychoanalytic implications of his rubric, he makes substantial use of the key notion of repression and repeatedly underscores the “psychic” or “psychological” dimensions of the play’s conflict, its “trauma of death.” By far, however, ideology-critique constitutes the bulk of the responses that have so far advanced our understanding of what Henry Louis Gates describes as the play’s “semantics of death.”⁷ This seems, for the large part, to be a direct function of both the historical circumstances surrounding the writing of the play itself and the ideological frame set for its reception by Soyinka himself as evidenced by the now famous “Author’s Note” that prefaces it. At this point, I should point out that I do not by any means wish to suggest the psychological as more deserving of attention than any other critical yardstick, nor to imply a scale of evaluative priorities! It merely strikes me as remarkable that, despite its obvious suggestiveness, this mode of engaging *Horseman* should have remained unexplored this late into the exegetical enterprise that the work has spawned. If it is true that Soyinka’s high-culture avant-gardism and the alleged “difficulty” and “complexity” of his work mean that much work remains to be done to make his astounding body of work yield even more of its bounties, then every critical tool ought to be brought to the task. What follows then is offered in the spirit of that collective endeavour.

Soyinka emphatically locates the semantic essence of *Horseman* in the metaphysical “abyss of transition” evoked by the Yoruba concept

King’s Horseman,” *Research in African Literatures* 24.1 (Spring 1993): 67-79, at 69.

⁷ See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Being, the Will, and the Semantics of Death,” in *Wole Soyinka: Freedom and Complexity*, 62-76.

of the cosmos as constituted by the realms of the living, the dead and the unborn, with the abyss of transition as the numinous transitional passage that links all three realms. Soyinka has called this realm of transition the Fourth Stage in his well-known essay of that title.⁸ In his effort to dramatise the intricacies of this fourth stage as part of his avowed project of “race retrieval,” Soyinka peremptorily relegates the colonial factor in the play to the status of “a catalytic incident, merely.” But this has been strenuously contested, with Kwame Anthony Appiah going as far as calling the claim “disingenuous.”⁹ Furthermore, Soyinka’s portrayal of Elesin Oba’s failure to commit ritual suicide to accompany his dead king to the world of the ancestors as due to a failure of will has also been the subject of some of the more interesting contestations. But in so privileging will, Soyinka merely presents a dramatic elaboration of the defining characteristic of his patron muse, Ogun—an iron-cast will to action. But as Biodun Jeyifo has charged, the result is an “over-valorization”¹⁰ of will and volition as the determinant sources of being. Together, play and preface as well as Soyinka’s theoretical formulation of the essence of Yoruba tragic drama point to questions that require further exploration. Such as: what is the proper relation between will as a mythopoeic construct and will as a lived human quality? Is it conceivable in the African world of Soyinka’s mythopoesis that will, however perceived, is susceptible to

⁸ See Wole Soyinka, “The Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origins of Yoruba Tragedy,” in *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 140-160.

⁹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 78.

¹⁰ See Biodun Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), in particular at 80 and 286.

determination—that it can be objectively paralysed, to use a word that he allows—by totally incomprehensible and disabling circumstances, as in moments of historical trauma? If so, how much cachet is to be allowed Soyinka's equally vaunted notion of honour which presupposes knowledge of a clear choice between right and wrong course of action, that is, moral agency, if we grant that some historical moments may be so catastrophic as to temporarily shatter the existing frame of knowledge, thereby stunning the mind, arresting the will to action and complicating the ethical code? In such moments, how is inaction to be understood? Or, put another way, should action be reified into an end in itself so that any action, even if blind and counter-productive, is always to be preferred to inaction? What does it mean for reader or audience that Soyinka's radical myth-making and his insistence on the metaphysical as the only plane wherein *Horseman's* ritual meaning can be extracted leads to the elision of brutal socio-political realities, resulting in a necessary repression of the non-endogenous source of conflict located in the colonial factor that nevertheless looms large in the play? And, following from any and all of these questions, is there another plausible explanation for Elesin's failure of will *other* than what the text ostensibly presents us—a personal weakness arising from the tragic flaw of hubris and hedonism?

These questions taken in clusters or together largely form the heuristic frame for my discussion. I intend to focus on the peculiar dynamics of what Soyinka, in one of several polemical responses to his early orthodox Marxist interlocutors, rightly saw as the human resort

“to the strangest devices” for nullifying death, “the desire to ‘put off Death,’ ‘to come to terms with Death,’ to ‘communalize’ Death so as to make it more bearable for the individual, ‘to humour Death.’”¹¹ I propose to use the psychoanalytic concept of trauma for a depth-psychology analysis of *Horseman* by locating Elesin’s tragedy in the lacuna between knowing and not knowing with which historical traumas confront the victim, individual and communal. The struggle of the colonised to compel respect for the self-sufficiency of their culture being a matter of life and death both literally and symbolically, the great battle to put off death necessarily takes place first and foremost in the individual’s mind as shaped by its perception and processing of social stimuli. This makes it imperative, according to the view I am proposing, to read the play against the loud strictures of its author, to wit, that the colonial aspect, or rather, the historical factor, is *not* a mere catalytic incident but the very fulcrum on which the play turns. In returning to this old controversy, I should like to add to Appiah’s—and after him, Adebayo Williams, Tejumola Olaniyan and Olakunle George’s persuasive arguments¹²—the observation that a catalyst, if I remember my secondary school chemistry teacher’s lesson well, is a substance that facilitates a reaction without taking part in, nor affecting the outcome of, the chemical process. If this is true, then

¹¹ Wole Soyinka, “Who is Afraid of Elesin Oba,” in *Art, Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. Biodun Jeyifo (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 62-81, at 77.

¹² See Adebayo Williams, “Ritual and the Political Unconscious”; Tejumola Olaniyan, “Wole Soyinka: ‘Race Retrieval’ and Cultural Self-Apprehension” in his *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance: The Invention of Cultural Identities in African, African-American, and Caribbean Drama* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 43-66; and Olakunle George, “Cultural Criticism in Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*,” *Representations* 67 (Summer 1999), 67-91.

surely neither a first nor second reading of *Horseman* would see the colonial factor as playing that inert role in the reactive process it set off. Furthermore, in examining the psycho-social impact of the traumatic encounter between the hitherto autochthonous and self-directed Oyo kingdom on the one hand, and colonialism on the other, I consider the anomalies of affect and the death-denying devices resorted to by Elesin, the Oyo people, and Soyinka himself by drawing on the Freudian notions of *Angstbereitschaft* or preparedness for anxiety, latency, transference, and Robert Jay Lifton's concept of life continuity. I hazard the claim that what has been widely identified as Elesin's failure of will may, perhaps, be better explained as caused by the stunning impact of the colonial trauma that significantly determines the response of the Yoruba world which insists on acting as if its autonomy were still intact. I liken the structure of the anguish of ritual self-dissolution and reconstitution in Soyinka's "chthonic realm" to that of a historical trauma, at least in the way that both chart the ambiguity of knowing and not knowing and how that determines action. Lastly, I will examine the transference dynamics that Soyinka betrays in writing *Horseman* right inside the belly of the colonial whale—in England. To follow George, I could restate my aim as discovering what happens if we linger a bit longer on the dissonance made visible by Appiah and the *psychological* predicament that explains it, which in turn demands that we inspect more closely the fruitful intersection of play and playwright's prefatory note.¹³ This

¹³ George's formulation on page 85 of his essay is as follows: "What happens if we linger a bit longer on the dissonance made visible by Appiah and the predicament

seems like a very ambitious project, perhaps well beyond the scope of a dissertation chapter, but as already hinted, however, I shall not be taking all the questions above one by one but adopting them heuristically for my discussion. This way, I hope to keep the forest as the trees in proper perspective.

“Nothing but the Will”: Of Trauma, Gods and (Hu)man(s)

Let us start with Soyinka’s conception of will in “The Fourth Stage” where he insists that the will of acting man alone can rescue being from annihilation by inimical forces:

[N]othing but the will ... rescues being from annihilation within the abyss. Ogun is embodiment of Will, and the Will is the paradoxical truth of destructiveness and creativeness in acting man. Only one who has himself undergone the experience of disintegration, whose spirit has been tested and whose psychic resources laid under stress by the forces most inimical to individual assertion, only he can understand and be the force of fusion between two contradictions. The resulting sensibility is also the sensibility of the artist, and he is a profound artists only to the degree to which he contemplates and expresses this principle of destruction and re-creation.¹⁴

that explains it—that is to say, if we look more closely at the intersection of the prefatory author’s note and the play itself?”

¹⁴ Wole Soyinka, “The Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origins of Yoruba Tragedy,” in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, 150.

But I have gone too far ahead, for we cannot make sense of this hallowed place reserved for Ogun without going a few pages back to the moment that distinguished him. As noted above, what Soyinka calls the fourth stage, “the seething cauldron of the dark world will and psyche,” the “transitional yet inchoate matrix of death and becoming,” “the chthonic realm,” among several other appellations, represents the domain in which Ogun alone of the deities that emerged from the insurrectionary fragmentation of Orinsa-nla, the original godhead, dared to cross the gulf created by the “primal severance” between humanity and godhead. The gods, then, were in search of “reunion with man,” of self-completion or the recuperation of a dissociated identity through the reintegration of alienated “essence” with self, just as the colonised or any subjugated people or group might in the more mundane terms of socio-political struggle for self-determination. The fragmentation of godhead, according to Yoruba lore, was wrought by Orisa-nla’s attendant slave, Atunda, rolling a rock down his unsuspecting master’s back. Two of three dictionary definitions of trauma¹⁵ explain it as (a) an injury, such as a wound, to bodily tissue caused by an external agent, and (b) a disordered psychic or behavioural state resulting from mental or emotional stress or physical injury. In psychoanalytic terms, however, trauma connotes injury to both body and mind (more on this in Chapter Three), including the resultant mental state. As Cathy Caruth points out, what causes trauma is “a shock that appears to work very much like a

¹⁵ I refer to Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 10th edition.

bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind's experience of time."¹⁶ In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud likens the cause of trauma to a catastrophic accident which a victim walks away from and apparently survives only for her to later enact the ordeal through repetitive actions triggered by flashbacks.¹⁷ As he further suggests in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, traumatic neuroses designate the condition that occurs after catastrophic events such as "severe mechanical concussions, railway disasters and other accidents involving a risk to life."¹⁸ Such an event breaches the normal defences of the mind against external stimuli and enters into unconsciousness unmediated, hence its future return by way of repetitive acts as the mind seeks belatedly to master the event. It also creates the gap in consciousness he dubbed "latency" and which I propose to adopt as a partial explanatory concept in this discussion. Following Soyinka's account in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, the fragmentation of the original godhead by a slave's boulder rolled down his back¹⁹ fits such a traumatic event, and the ensuing deities' search for reintegration parallels the return to the past for the pre-traumatised state of being:

¹⁶ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 59.

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage Books, 1939), 84.

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 597. It should be pointed out, however, that the contemporary definition of trauma as Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome extends the definition beyond disordered mental responses to combat and natural or mechanical catastrophes to include rape, child abuse and a number of other violent occurrences. See Caruth's Introduction to Part I, "Trauma and Experience," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), vii.

¹⁹ Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, 152; subsequent reference within the text. Soyinka's extensive poetic elaboration of this myth of theogony can be found in the eponymously titled poem, "Idanre," in Wole Soyinka, *Early Poems* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 53-84.

Spiritually, the primordial disquiet of the Yoruba psyche may be expressed as the existence in collective memory of a primal severance in transitional ether, whose first effective defiance is symbolised in the myth of the gods' descent to earth and the battle with immense chaotic growth which had sealed off reunion with man. For they were coming down, not simply to be acknowledged but to be re-united with human essence, to reassume that portion of re-creative transient awareness which the first deity Orisa-nla possessed and expressed through his continuous activation of man images ... just as man is grieved by a consciousness of loss of the eternal essence of his being and must indulge in symbolic transactions to recover his totality of being. (144-45)

Thus, according to Soyinka, tragedy in Yoruba traditional drama is "the anguish of this severance, the fragmentation of essence from self." It is important, for reasons that will become clear below, to note the stress Soyinka lays on the point that the gods' descent to earth was for the purpose of reunion with man, as otherwise, "this tragedy would not be, the anguish of severance would not attain such tragic proportions if, the gods' position on earth ... in man's conception ... was to be one of divine remoteness." This fact assumes significant relevance in the light of Soyinka's dogged insistence on the metaphysical dimension as the ultimate source of the conflict in *Horseman*, alongside the unqualified view of will as the final arbiter of that conflict, which, as I claim, has often led to insufficient attention to

the psychological turmoil of Ogun, “first suffering deity, first creative energy, the first challenger, and conqueror of transition,” as of Elesin. For, as Soyinka concedes, the protagonist actor in Yoruba tragedy “resists, like Ogun before him, the final step towards complete annihilation” (143). Soyinka not only speaks of the tragic actor’s recoil from death, presumably driven by the self-preservation instinct, but also underlines an additional reason for it: the unknowing, and, so, the indecisiveness, that results from chthonic chaos cast here as “the realm of nothingness ... which is potentially destructive of human awareness, through areas of terror and blind energies,” adding that ritual anguish is experienced as the “primal transmission of the god’s despair – vast, numinous, *always incomprehensible*” (146; my emphasis).

This is a good juncture, then, to attempt that parallel between the structure of the ritual anguish of the protagonist actor in Yoruba tragedy (Ogun/Elesin) as outlined for us by Soyinka and the stunned, amnesiac psychic state of the trauma victim. The gap in consciousness exhibited by the victim of a traumatic event constitutes, in real terms, a period in which she finds her experience incomprehensible. Here is Freud’s apt description of the phenomenon:

It may happen that someone gets away, apparently unharmed, from the spot where he has suffered a shocking accident, for instance a train collision. In the course of the following weeks, however, he develops a series of grave psychical and motor symptoms, which can be ascribed only to his shock or whatever else happened at the time of the accident. He has developed a

“traumatic neurosis.” This appears quite incomprehensible and is therefore a novel fact. The time that elapsed between the accident and the first appearance of the symptoms is called the “incubation period”... It is the feature which one might term *latency*.²⁰

While steeped in this state, the victim of trauma exhibits a compulsive tendency to repeat the event as part of the mind’s belated effort to master what its defence mechanism was not prepared for. The victim is said then to be acting-out her trauma even while repressing or is in denial of what actually happened. Only a working-through of the trauma by way of a complex process of its acknowledgement can weaken the compulsion to repeat the founding event, integrate it into consciousness and restore agential capacity or will.²¹ Yet, even while acknowledging the protagonist actor’s psychic despair, incomprehension and blind energies; even while accepting that man can be “crushed and robbed ... of self-consciousness” by “disasters and conflicts” Soyinka nonetheless never wavers for a moment in insisting that only will “rescues being from annihilation,” from “loss of self within this abyss” (149).²² I shall subject this claim to further scrutiny²³ in due course, but for now, it is worth delaying a moment to

²⁰ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones, 84.

²¹ I have discussed the impact of this latency period on the trauma victim’s effort at self-apprehension, or reconstitution of the self, as well as provided a more detailed explication of the concepts of acting-out and working-through in Chapters Three and Four respectively.

²² In the line with the reading I am proposing, this abyss (of dissolution, transition) as well as the various other designations by which Soyinka names the chthonic realm of chaos and incomprehension would be similar to the gap or latency period of the victim’s unconsciousness or unacknowledged trauma.

²³ Further, for instance, to the charge of over-valorization of will by Jeyifo to which I have already referred above.

highlight two examples, the one of another “god-man” historical figure from Christian mythology and the other from *Horseman* itself.

Regarding the former, we need only add to the parallel already drawn by Soyinka his further elaboration of the point, to the effect that “the deities stand in the same situation to the living as do the ancestors and the unborn, obeying the same laws, suffering the same agonies and uncertainties” (148). Jesus the Christ is one such deity who bridges the primal severance between godhead and humanity wrought through the “fall” in the Garden of Eden for the purpose of reunion with man, self-completion and redemption.

The pathos of Elesin recalls Christ’s in many ways. Like Christ, his existence had a single purpose: to willingly die and by his death effect what Soyinka might call an act of “cosmic adjustment” (156) that would ensure the continued existence of humanity. The Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, uses language that casts Christ as a ritual scapegoat in foretelling his coming as the Messiah to deliver the Jews from bondage: “he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows”; “with his stripes we are healed.” Perhaps even more poignant, Isaiah suggests that Christ would not resist the final step towards annihilation: “he shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied.”²⁴ And, indeed, the first three gospels record Christ as master of his fate by readily accepting death,²⁵ though all four also show him recoiling from his mission, even if temporarily. At the hour of his death on the cross,

²⁴ Isaiah 53:4, 5 and 11. All reference to King James Version of the Bible, Standard Text Edition.

²⁵ Christ predicts his death and its manner (betrayal by one of his twelve disciples) in Matthew 26:24-28, Mark 9:31, Luke 9:22 and 44, and Luke 18:33.

Matthew and Mark note that Christ thrice asked God, his father, to let the cup of his death pass away from him. The words Christ uses, the variations of the two chroniclers being so slight as to be negligible, are, “O my father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.”²⁶ Although he is reported as reconciled to God’s will being done—“O my father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done”—he nevertheless betrays his trauma when he cries out at the moment of death reproaching his father for “forsaking” him.²⁷ Mark even shows Christ moving from imploring God to seemingly *demanding* an end to his ritual anguish: “And he said, Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; *take this cup from me.*”²⁸ Christ’s “failure of will” in the grip of his death trauma is graphically illustrated in Luke’s account. According to Luke, after Christ’s first prayer asking that the cup be passed from him, an angel appeared from heaven to strengthen him. Yet, “being in an agony he prayed more earnestly,” and then comes this fine detail: “and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.”²⁹ If the deities and man obey the same laws and suffer the same agonies and uncertainties, the Bible offers sacred testimony!

Confronted with the trauma of death, Will proves an inadequate resource and even gods resort to the strangest devices, as witness Christ both accepting and rejecting the very purpose for which he, as God, incarnates himself and descends to earth. *Horseman* begins with

²⁶ See Matthew 26:39-44 and Mark 14:35-39.

²⁷ See Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34.

²⁸ My emphasis.

²⁹ See Luke 22:42-44.

the same interesting stratagem for postponing death. We are introduced to the play by Elesin's own simultaneous denial and acceptance of death, indicative of the artful repression of his trauma or ritual anguish. If, as Caruth points out, the truth of a trauma being delayed or belated, it cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in the actions and language of the victim,³⁰ then Elesin would be the perfect example. The sheer metaphorical exuberance of Elesin's language, indeed the pure poetry of his speech and ritual dance in this opening scene, betrays his death anxiety as it bespeaks a form of acting-out symbolic of an unacknowledged trauma. At the point when all earthly concerns ought to be over for him as nothing but the stark option of death remains, Elesin chooses the medium of poetry for the expression of his will. Poetry, being a genre defined by polysemy, due to its exultation in figures, it is no surprise that we soon discern a conflicted will more inclined to cling to life than enter the narrowing passage of transition into which he ostensibly dances through the detour of the market-place. Everything in the opening scene points to his unpreparedness for death, and we could even start with the very first words of his Praise-Singer, mock-serious in tone, but that nevertheless fault Elesin's choice of the market-place at this most solemn hour. But nothing betrays Elesin's unpreparedness for death, against all his boastful denials, more than his curious digressionary tale of the "Not-I bird":

³⁰ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 4.

Death came calling.
Who does not know his rasp of reeds?
A twilight whisper in the leaves before
The great araba falls. Did you hear it?
Not I! swears the farmer. He snaps
His fingers round his head, abandons
A hard-worn [sic] harvest and begins
A rapid dialogue with his legs.³¹

Elesin sings the fear of several kinsmen of various callings—a representative list that includes hunter, courtesan, mallam/teacher, priest, palmwine-tapper—who display similar panicked terror as the farmer at the mere prospect of the Not-I bird, of death, being within the vicinity. So universal is this fear of death that even the forest, “the lair of beasts,” knows it too. Elesin ends his list with the Not-I bird itself whose tale signifies the very ubiquity of death: as it flees from its nest upon the “whisper” of death’s coming being borne to him on the wind, beasts and humans encounter it and are themselves panicked into flight. Thus even the Not-I bird is prey to death, as Elesin informs us: “Not-I / Has long abandoned home. This same dawn / I heard him twitter in the gods’ abode. / Ah, companions of this living world / What a thing this is, that even those / We call immortal / Should fear to die” (9). Humans and animals, even immortals fear to die; but not Elesin, as he would have us believe:

³¹ Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King’s Horseman*, Norton Critical Edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 7; subsequent reference within the text.

I, when that Not-I bird perched
Upon my roof, bade him seek his nest again,
Safe, without care or fear. I unrolled
My welcome mat for him to see. Not-I
Flew happily away, you'll hear his voice
No more in this lifetime. (9)

The boast is so loud we recognise it right away for bluster, for if we take him seriously for a moment, then Elesin will have by his vaunted bravery—"without care or fear"—alone banished death from the face of the earth altogether, at least in his lifetime! Seduced by his own powers of poetry, he declares that he is master of his fate:

I am master of my Fate. When the hour comes
Watch me dance along the narrowing path
Glazed by the soles of my great precursors.
My soul is eager. I shall not turn aside. (10)

That Elesin's soul is eager he leaves no one in doubt, though it remains unclear whether it is for his appointed death. Which is why the market women, who have halted their closing ritual of emptying their stalls and gathered round him, ask if he will not delay, and even after he affirms his resolve, ask yet again if nothing would hold him back. Before going further into Elesin's loud pronouncement on honour as the meaning of life, followed, however, by his clever manipulation of the market women to satisfy his every demand to be

honoured—"honour me," "do me credit" he repeatedly demands—I would like to turn to Freud's speculations on the intriguing way the ego's instinct for self-preservation manifests itself and Robert Jay Lifton's concept of "life continuity" in further elaboration of my argument about the impact of Elesin's death trauma on his will.

A Betrothed Maiden or the Wish to Die Only on One's Terms

In language that resonates with the character of Elesin, Freud begins *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* with the view that in the theory of psychoanalysis "the course taken by mental events is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle." The course of such events, Freud explains, is activated by an unpleasure-pleasure tension, with the mind seeking to cause its resolution in favour of pleasure, or to ensure that the "final outcome coincides with a lowering of that tension ... an avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure." But this primary mode of the mental apparatus comes in conflict with the outside world which seeks to regulate human conduct through the imposition of moral strictures, the function of the super-ego. Thus, driven by the ego's instinct for self-preservation, the pleasure principle is replaced by the reality principle which compels the "postponement of satisfaction and the temporary toleration of unpleasure as a step on the long indirect road to pleasure."³² If we apply this insight to Elesin, we might say that he simply refuses to subject his mind's primary mode of seeking pleasure to the rude discipline of the reality principle.

³² See Sigmund Freud, *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay, 594-96.

Thus, he sees his elaborate ruse as merely a step on the “long indirect road to pleasure” since his voluntary death anon would elevate him to the world of the ancestors for reunion with the dead king, and, presumably, resumption of the giddy pleasures that they both shared when he was on earth. And here, following Msiska in my first epigraph, Soyinka certainly meets Freud. Soyinka’s observation about the tendency of humans to have recourse to the strangest devices for nullifying or at least postponing death quoted above echoes Freud’s outline of the mental course of the instinct for self-preservation. Needless to say, death is the greatest unpleasure; what remains to be explained is the exact cause of this phenomenon. Freud identifies it as fright, “the state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it.”

Clearly, no one is ever quite prepared for his or her death, which suggests that our death, though inevitable and long accepted, still comes to us as something of a surprise with relative degrees of traumatisation. Consequently, the trauma of death is caused precisely by a “lack of any preparedness for anxiety.”³³ Even more crucial to my argument here is Freud’s notion of death as a return to the original inorganic state of existence but only on conditions inherent to each organism; that is, on the organism’s own terms. In other words, that life itself is the result of a traumatic event, in that it was caused by a shattering or cataclysmic act that turned a previously inorganic entity into a living one.³⁴ The resultant process known as life or the organic

³³ Sigmund Freud, *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay, at 598 and 608-09.

³⁴ On this point, it is worth noting that birth, which instances the beginning of an autonomous living human being in the external world, has been described as a

state is then condemned to a compulsive wish to return to the old inorganic state—"If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for *internal* reasons." From this, Freud concludes, following Schopenhauer, that "*the aim of all life is death*" and, looking backwards, that '*inanimate things existed before living ones*.'" Freud's conclusion bears quoting in full, especially as it throws much needed light on the curious behaviour of Elesin in the vortex of his death anxiety, even while volubly asserting mastery of his fate:

The hypothesis of self-preservative instincts, such as we attribute to all living things, stands in marked opposition to the idea that instinctual life as a whole serves to bring about death. Seen in this light, the theoretical importance of the instinct of self-preservation, of self-assertion and of mastery greatly diminishes. They are component instincts whose function is to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death, and to ward off any possible ways of returning to inorganic existence other than those which are immanent in the organism itself. We have no longer to reckon with the organism's puzzling determination ... to maintain its own existence in the face of

traumatic event. Robert Jay Lifton discusses this topic in Chapter Five of *The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life* (New York: Touchstone, 1980), 53-72, and provides useful bibliographical material, including an aptly titled work by Otto Rank, *The Trauma of Birth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936). It seems to me possible to argue that Soyinka's riposte to Nietzsche's assertion that it is an act of hubris to be born, to wit, that it is no less an act of hubris to die, locates the trauma at both ends of the axis of life. See *Myth, Literature and the African World*, 158.

every obstacle. What we are left with is the fact that the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion.³⁵

It goes without saying that humans will vary greatly in the terms or fashion according to which they would wish to die. It is no surprise, then, that Elesin chooses not only to lay his head upon the lap of the market-women “and go to sleep,” to “touch feet with their feet ... smell their flesh, their sweat, the smell of indigo on their cloth” as the last air he breathes³⁶ on his way to ancestordom. And no surprise that he not only desires this lavish pleasuring of the senses at the market-place but also insists, quite bewilderingly, on wedding a betrothed maiden so that his seed would take root in the earth he leaves behind. As before, he overawes the women by sheer force of rhetoric:

All you who stand before the spirit that dares
The opening of the last door of passage,
Dare to rid my going of regrets! My wish
Transcends the blotting out of thought
In one mere moment's tremor of the senses.
Do me credit. And do me honour.
I am girded for the route beyond
Burdens of waste and longing.
Then let me travel light. Let
Seed that will not serve the stomach
On the way remain behind. Let it take root

³⁵ Sigmund Freud, *The Freud Reader*, 613-14; immediate preceding reference and quotations from 612-13, emphases original. Freud's acknowledgement of Schopenhauer comes several pages later, at 618.

³⁶ Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman*, 6.

In the earth of my choice, in this earth
I leave behind. (16)

Elesin who moments ago claims to gladly and voluntarily embrace—to have, indeed, conquered—death now betrays his longing for life by asking, in effect and rather contradictorily, that his joy be rid of regrets! Far from a willingness to enter the gulf of transition, then, Elesin’s repressed fear of death returns as a wish for regeneration of life. Thus, Elesin’s desire to wed in the wee moment before his death bespeaks the timeless human anxiety for life continuity, given metaphorical expression by the image of the parent and sapling plantain he evokes. This is underscored by Iyaloja’s cowered acquiescence on the pretext that it is good that the strength of forebears (and, traditionally, Elesin at this numinous moment is already an ancestor) be ploughed back into the womb that gave them being (17).

Robert Jay Lifton sets out to investigate what he describes as “the elusive psychological relationship between the phenomenon of death and the flow of life,” a quest that involves the question of identity and the life cycle in his acclaimed work, *The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life*. Lifton posits the dual paradigm of ultimate and proximate levels for his exegesis in which the ultimate level “has to do with symbolizing our connection to our history and our biology” and the proximate our “more immediate feelings and images.” These two levels of symbolic activity, Lifton adds, combine in the human struggle “not to merely remain alive but to *feel*

alive.” In adopting Lifton for my analysis here, I take the view that the ultimate dimension of connection to group history has been extensively analysed by critics of *Horseman*, but not so, if at all, the proximate level of powerful intimate feelings generated by the confrontation with death. As Lifton explains, we need to know about the mind’s general possibilities and “most extreme pitfalls around death imagery” in order to understand “radical new influences,” which in turn would make it impossible for us to see “‘ordinary’ relationships to death and life-continuity outside a context of ultimate threat.”³⁷ As I hope to show below, colonialism constituted one such radical new influence that posed a grave danger to the way of life represented by Elesin. Indeed, that colonialism spelt “social death” for the world of the colonised, hence one reason why Elesin manifests such “enormous vitality”³⁸ in his wish to not only remain alive, but to also *feel* alive. In the sheer vitality of his presence, suggestive of nervous energy, Elesin also displays one of two likely psychic responses to mortal threat synthesised by Lifton: extreme stillness and cessation of movement, or frenetic compensatory activity (128). But nothing testifies to the feeling of aliveness—of virility, or vitality—more than the sexual act. Elesin makes a sexual display of himself among the women in the marketplace, much like a peacock preening its feathers; or as he even more precisely suggests, the cock-of-the-roost: “This market is my roost. When I come among the women I am a chicken with a hundred

³⁷ Robert Jay Lifton, *The Broken Connection*, 4 and 5.

³⁸ Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King’s Horseman*, 5; in the opening stage directions. On this score, it is worth noting that Lifton proposes one definition of anxiety as “threatened vitality.” Robert Jay Lifton, *The Broken Connection*, 128; subsequent reference within the text.

mothers.”³⁹ He not only sings and dances vigorously and infectiously, but also charms, or rather, inveigles, the women to adorn him for sexual conquest. The entire scene is defined by Elesin’s mobilisation of “festive idioms”⁴⁰ other than that of the ritual dissolution for which this is his chosen introit, resulting in a wasteful expenditure of psychic energy. This chosen fashion of departure is, nonetheless, a form of “ecstatic transcendence” that seeks to overcome “the passage of time” and blend all in “transtemporal harmony”; a symbolic reordering, according to Lifton, “central to various kinds of individual and collective revitalization.” For “the plunge into chaos (disintegration, death) includes wildness and spontaneity” which is at the same time “culturally stylized.” Lifton quotes a passage from Octavio Paz’s commentary on the meaning of the orgiastic features of the Mexican fiesta, of which the conclusion most relevant for my purposes here is that “ritual death promotes a rebirth.”⁴¹ The task humans are faced with, Lifton opines, is to combine the awareness of death and the loss and terror it induces with a capacity to feel, love, transcend and become whole (34). Lifton emphasises the view I alluded to at the very beginning of this chapter and underscored by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: the struggle with death as the fundamental source of human anxiety, and that, thus, we must open ourselves to “the full impact of death in order to rediscover and reinterpret the movement

³⁹ Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King’s Horseman*, 6.

⁴⁰ Biodun Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka*, 154.

⁴¹ Quoted in Robert Jay Lifton, *The Broken Connection*, 29, but see Octavio Paz, “The Day of the Dead,” in *Death and Identity*, ed. Robert Fulton (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1965), 387-94.

and sequence of life” (51-52)— especially, I would add, of life lived under the awful threat of colonial enslavement.

Elesin’s death-hour wedding, purportedly to enable a parting gift of his seed in the earth of his choice, can also be linked, curiously enough, to his vociferous protestations of honour. Drawing on two accounts of the anxiety that surrounds dying, Lifton elaborates the view that death tests integrity at several levels, including “one’s capacity to anticipate an honourable ‘trace’ one will leave behind for the future.” This, seen from a different angle, is not a small matter for Elesin after all. This “trace for the future” as a test of the integrity of death occupies a far more important place in the ideological structure of *Horseman* than may be readily acknowledged, even though Iyaloja’s closing words of the play are addressed to Elesin’s bride now fortuitously pregnant from the lone night of their union. “Now forget the dead,” Iyaloja urges her, “forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn.”⁴² Elesin in all the contradictory boastfulness and simultaneous recourse to the strangest devices for eluding death thus exhibits “the flow of life in the face of threat and death.”

So far, I have focussed on the individual character, Elesin, thus tending to highlight the personal dimension of his trauma, whereas I

⁴² Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King’s Horseman*, 63. I should be quick to add, though, that Ketu H. Katrak rightly notes this dimension of the play’s symbolic action. According to her, “Elesin’s failure of will is due to the fact that “in the battle of the forces of creativity and destructiveness within him, the principles of life and fertility, embodied in the young girl, won,” adding that although the events depicted by the play centre on death, “the drama ends with the assertion of life through the image of the unborn in the last line of the play.” She concludes that although the tragic personages die and leave the community behind, they nevertheless “infuse it, through their deaths, with life-sustaining powers.” See her *Wole Soyinka and Modern Tragedy: A Study of Dramatic Theory and Practice* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986), 99 and 100.

claim at the beginning that his tragedy as that of the Oyo kingdom dramatised in *Horseman* is a direct consequence of a collective *angstbereitschaft*, of a group unreadiness for anxiety. This, then, is a good point for extending my discussion of the intricate dynamics of historical trauma beyond the individual to the group while still keeping an eye on the protagonist actor whose action and inaction drive the narrative of the play. It means that I must now tackle the fraught question of the historical or colonial factor already mentioned in passing as it bears directly on the relation between Elesin's psychic turmoil and consequent voiding of will on the one hand and that of the collective psyche and capacity for self-determination on the other. For if trauma, to follow Kai Erikson's elaboration of its definition, is a blow to bodily tissues as well as the mental damage ensuing from it, then a collective trauma is such blow and damage to the social tissues of a community. The tissues of a community, Erikson argues, can be damaged "in much the same way as the tissues of mind and body," and even when that does not happen, the traumatic wounds inflicted on individuals can "combine to create a mood, an ethos ... a group culture" that differs in significant ways from the sum of the private wounds that make it up.⁴³ Erikson's argument is borne out by the characteristics of a human community, among them its functions as a cushion for pain, a context for intimacy, and perhaps more important (at least for my purposes here), as "the repository for binding traditions." Such that, where a disaster has befallen a community, its

⁴³ Kai Erikson, "Notes on Trauma and Community" in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 185.

members may feel “torn loose from their cultural moorings” and set “adrift” in a strange new order, even where the community collectively survives the tragedy and it remains standing with much of its social structure still intact (188). With that in mind, let us now revisit the vexed question of the historical dimension or, properly speaking, the colonial factor, in the drama of existence Soyinka presents us.

The Catalytic and the Catastrophic: Colonialism, a Closing Market and Anxiety in the African World

For all the carnivalesque atmosphere of the first act of *Horseman*, a loud and unmistakable “wail” provides the refrain to virtually every verse of Elesin’s rhapsodic paean to life and its beauteous delights. The sonorous strains of Praise-singer’s weighted anxiety come through wholly unbidden, as it were, and against the festive idiom of the opening scene. At any rate, the note of foreboding seems to be called forth by the merest suggestion: all it takes for Praise-singer to betray his anxiety, the fear that the Yoruba world is tilted dangerously on a precipice constituted by the successful incursion of colonialism is Elesin’s passing invocation of the illustrious tradition of his great forebears as he expresses his odd terms of dying among the women in the market-place. The exchange is worth “listening” to at some length:

ELESIN This night I’ll lay my head upon their lap and go to sleep.
This night I’ll touch feet with their feet in a dance that is no
longer of this earth. But the smell of their flesh, their sweat, the

smell of indigo on their cloth, this is the last air I wish to breathe as I go to meet my great forebears.

PRAISE-SINGER In their time the world was never tilted from its groove, it shall not be in yours.

ELESIN The gods have said No.

PRAISE-SINGER In their time the great wars came and went, the little wars came and went; the white slavers came and went, they took away the heart of our race, they bore away the mind and muscle of our race. The city fell and was rebuilt; the city fell and our people trudged through mountain and forest to found a new home but—Elesin Oba do you hear me?

ELESIN I hear your voice Olohun-iyo.

PRAISE-SINGER Our world was never wrenched from its true course.

ELESIN The gods have said No.

PRAISE-SINGER There is only one home to the life of a river-mussel; there is only one home to the life of a tortoise; there is only one shell to the soul of man; there is only one world to the spirit of our race. If that world leaves its course and smashes on boulders of the great void, whose world will give us shelter?

ELESIN It did not in the time of my forebears, it shall not in mine.(6)

This intriguing dialogue so early in the play creates an ominous material setting for the conflict of death, transition and renewal that it dramatises. *Horseman* is, after all, Soyinka's only play based wholly on an actual historical event. The sheer incantatory form of the exchange serves to make repetition—which might easily have tended towards the opposite effect of deflation or reduction of affect—underscore the acute

communal anxiety that drives the plot. Much can be made of the “true course” of this fear, given Soyinka’s relegation, and, indeed, outright denial of its immediate cause—and I will come to that presently—but it is obvious that long before Elesin would inch close to the transitional passage of dissolution, we are able to apprehend, to “elicit,” the play’s “threnodic essence,” a goal Soyinka insists is recoverable only from the metaphysical abyss of transition the drama tries to enact.⁴⁴ An aspect of this dialogue that I would like to stress as evidence of the repressive structure of historical trauma is Elesin’s denial of what is already obvious to his attendant. Note how short and shorn of any shred of doubt Elesin’s answers to Praise-singer’s recounted fears are; answers which, on second inspection, appear remarkably indirect and evasive. His tone is passive and he fails to use the first person pronoun in his response to each instance of Praise-singer’s annotated fear, saying merely that “The gods have said No” twice and, lastly, “It did not in the time of my forebears, it shall not in mine.” The only time Elesin uses the first-person subject pronoun is in response to Praise-singer’s rhetorical question, “but ... Elesin Oba do you hear me?” to which he answers, “I hear your voice Olohun-iyó.” This denial of death, notwithstanding, Elesin next launches, quite curiously, into the ballad of the Not-I bird! Even Praise-singer, griot and repository of cultural memory, is unaware of this birdlore. It is as if Elesin’s own fear and anxiety having been rudely awakened by Praise-singer’s apprehensions and so having been brought to momentary consciousness of his evasiveness, feels the need now to prove his will beyond any human

⁴⁴ Wole Soyinka, “Author’s Note” to *Death and the King’s Horseman*, 3.

weakness, contingency or force of history. As we have seen above, he concludes a virtuoso dramatisation of the Not-I bird's culturally dreaded role as harbinger of death with the outlandish claim that he is not only master of his fate but also that he alone in the whole world could meet death with scornful pride. With ill-timed bravado, he repeats his boast at the end of Act Three just before his death-trance is aborted: "Only Elesin," he says, "dies the unknowable death of death" (35).

But it is not only Praise-singer who betrays a death-anxiety or fear of the imminent plunging of the Yoruba world into chaos and disorder. The sole reason why Iyaloja and the women yield to Elesin's inordinate demands is the hope that their hands do not—to use their own apt words—"wrench[...] the world adrift / In emptiness." They chant this fear as a refrain to their expression of relief upon discovering that Elesin's first feigned offence is only over the easily remediable matter of adorning him in deserving attire. It is the fear that informs Iyaloja's doubt, expressed, albeit in parable, when giving in to Elesin's next unconscionable demand to wed her would-be daughter-in-law.⁴⁵ Indeed, it is possible to see the "fear" that even the dead Alafin confesses "will not depart from me" (34) as a subset of his social-death anxiety. For, who else but the Alafin should feel more immediately the withering impact on his sovereign will of both the early incursion, and, later, entrenchment, of the colonial order? Moreover, it is not only the external threat leading to a "desperate battle against the cultural 'other,'" as Adebayo Williams puts it, that

⁴⁵ Preceding quotations at 12 and 17-18.

the Alafin had to contend with before his death but also contradictions and threats from within,⁴⁶ stirred no doubt by the equally brutal logic of the Oyo Empire as of the invading British Empire. This death-anxiety, as has been observed, even forms the physical setting and mood of the play as denoted by the central place of the market as both literal and figural space. For instance, Ketu Katrak, commenting on the stage direction for the opening scene, describing the market as being “in its closing stages,” says that the ensuing atmosphere “evokes death.”⁴⁷ Williams, for his part, points out that for the Yoruba the market “serves as a barometer for the spiritual and psychic health of the community,” which is why he considers the fact that Soyinka chooses to focus on it at the beginning of the play “a stroke of genius.” But Williams notes that a “profound irony” attends this choice, given the asymmetries of power that mark the market of ideas in the wake of colonialism as a site of unequal exchange between the indigenous and the alien cultures, a development that contradicts the “natural logic” of the market as a “forum for buying and selling.” The play confronts us, he argues, with the peculiar phenomenon of “a culture that insists upon forcing its hardware on another culture without making a commensurate purchase in return.” Not surprisingly, Williams, like Katrak, moves from this bleak setting to the “apocalyptic mood” set for the play by Praise-singer. Williams goes on to attribute Praise-singer’s “unease and anguish” to Soyinka, citing the playwright’s “very choice of images”—“wrench,” “boulders,” and “void”—as evidence.⁴⁸ I shall

⁴⁶ Adebayo Williams, “Ritual and the Political Unconscious,” 78 and 74.

⁴⁷ Ketu H. Katrak, *Wole Soyinka and Modern Tragedy*, 96.

⁴⁸ Adebayo Williams, “Ritual and the Political Unconscious,” 73.

have something to say on the question of Soyinka's self-presence and implication in *Horseman* in the concluding section where I discuss the possible dynamics of repression and transference that subtend the social vision of the play.

Yet, until his arrest Elesin himself, Iyaloja and the market women, Olunde, and even Praise-singer persist in assuming a communal will to self-determination untouched in any substantive way by colonial power. It is now necessary to highlight the looming presence of the colonial factor in *Horseman* to show the extent and force of this uncanny denial. At this point, I will urge that we recall the title of this sub-section, with particular attention to the distinction I have sought to make between the "catalytic" (merely) and the "catastrophic," as well as the definition of trauma as a shocking experience that shatters previous epistemological frameworks, thus stunning the mind and its capacity for agency. The first notion of forces other than those within that may set the (Oyo) world adrift is given by Praise-singer when he speaks of "white slavers" who took away "the heart" and the "mind and muscle of our race." As Praise-singer notes, however, the race survived that as well as several internecine tragedies. That the new epoch may not fare as well under similar or equally serious threats is the repressed burden of the play, but we do not have to wait long to find out.

In Act Three, fresh from consummating his death-hour wedding, Elesin begins to dance himself into a trance as he enters the abyss of dissolution. It is here, however, that the colonial order unmistakably

vaunts its presence and power. Sergeant Amusa, a native now in the service of the colonial government, leads two constables to arrest and prevent Elesin's suicide. As he emphatically puts it, "The government say dat kin' ting must stop." If we may pause for a moment, the accent of power in which this colonial intent is expressed reminds of similar imperiousness in *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe's classic novel on the confrontation between the autochthonous, self-governing Igbos of eastern Nigeria and the emergent imperial order. As the people gather to decide what to do after the humiliation of their elders, including Okonkwo, the novel's protagonist, five messengers from "the white man's court" arrive to stop the assembly. Challenged by Okonkwo, the messenger answers simply, "The white man whose power you know too well has ordered this meeting to stop." Although Okonkwo drew his machete and killed the messenger as if that would also *kill* the message, "the meeting was stopped"⁴⁹ nevertheless. In the same way, Elesin in *Horseman* is also stopped from the execution of autonomous will quaintly described as "committing death" (20) by Amusa to Pilkings. In fact, we learn something of the irrepressible causative, as opposed to merely catalytic, role of the colonial factor from the structure of the play. Of its five acts, only the first one assumes an entirely endogenous setting: the market. Yet, even here, we are made palpably aware of a threatening outside force, leading to the apocalyptic mood set for the drama of the ensuing acts by Praise-singer. Quite remarkably, the very opening scene of the next Act presents the effective and undeniable change in the political order of

⁴⁹ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 204-05.

the Oyo empire, for nothing can be more factual than stage directions for Act Two: the verandah of the District Officer's bungalow replete with the domestic jollity of Pilkings and his wife, Jane. Colonialism is here so confidently entrenched that, as we soon learn, it can symbolically rehearse tango-steps in the natives' ancestral masks of death. In other words, to literally celebrate its vanquishing of the Oyo empire while the colonized are transfixed by their death anxiety. It is in this act that Sergeant Amusa informs Pilkings of the impending ritual suicide and where the stage is set for the resultant conflict of will and world view between colonizer and colonized. I have already noted the major event in Act Three above; suffice it to say in addition that it begins with colonial power flexing its muscle, albeit through its native errand-boys. The setting for this act is shared between the District Officer's bungalow and the market, very close to which Elesin evidently consummates his strange wedding, thus bolstering a false sense of autonomy. It is as if once the chorus of girls at the market successfully taunts and harasses Sergeant Amusa and his two partners into a temporary retreat, the omen of an imminent disintegration of their world earlier expressed by the women is banished and things are once again as they had always been. Consequently, both scene and act close movingly and powerfully with the same intense note of poetry that defines the first act, this time with the added poignancy of Elesin's death-trance which unforgettably enacts the metaphysical dimension of the conflict. But far more crucial to the point I am making here is the fact that the colonial factor is the central propelling force of the plot in the play's crucial last two acts.

Two facts are important here: first, the new setting in the Residency, in particular, the old slave-holding cellar annexed to it which becomes Elesin's prison; and, second, the unforgettable visual demonstration of the colonial order as represented by the figure of the Prince who, as Olunde rightly points out, is on a "tour of colonial possessions" (43). Effectively, then, the action of the play takes place mostly on the grounds of the colonial administration. Moreover, if *Horseman* begins with an exuberant assertion of vitality and self-determination in one-and-a-half⁵⁰ acts, so to speak, it ends with the stark reality of determination of the false indigenous sense of will and agency by the colonial factor that constitutes the temporal and spatial setting for the rest of the play. Indeed, it is within the confines of the residency that the imprisoned Elesin is condemned to perform the lowly task of merely whispering the secret words to release the dead Alafin into the ears of Olunde, the son who confirms the reversal of the order of the world by preceding the father into the gulf of transition as the king's favoured horseman. We can press the point further, for if ultimately the theme affirmed by *Horseman* is the ritual of life continuity, then it should be noted that Iyaloja, the redoubtable champion of tradition as bulwark of racial perpetration, speaks the last and poignant forward-looking words of the play in this same residency annexe-now-prison (60,62). Furthermore, although Elesin vacillates between his own weak, we might say "weakened," will and the historical determining force of colonialism as the cause of his and the community's tragedy, it

⁵⁰ This, of course, is not an attempt to introduce the notion of a half-Act as a new theatre terminology but merely an admittedly inelegant way of pressing home my argument about the centrality of the colonial factor.

is safe to say that taking him at his own words can only at best give equal prominence to both factors. And, at worst, highlight the communal denial of the change in the political order against which he is so disadvantageously pitted. There is good evidence for this reading of Elesin's progression, with a notably more serious tone, from the one cause (personal tragic flaw) to the other (the determination from without) in his attribution of blame, especially in the light of Iyaloja's focus on the former in her scathing condemnation. Says Elesin:

What were warnings beside the moist contact of living earth between my fingers? What were warnings beside the renewal of famished embers lodged eternally in the heart of man? But even that, even if it overwhelmed one with a thousandfold temptations to linger a little while, a man could overcome it. It is when the alien hand pollutes the source of will, when a stranger force of violence shatters the mind's calm resolution, this is when a man is made to commit the awful treachery of relief, commit in his thought the unspeakable blasphemy of seeing the hand of the gods in this alien rupture of his world. I know it was this thought that killed me, sapped my powers and turned me into an infant in the hands of unnameable strangers. I made to utter my spells anew but my tongue merely rattled in my mouth. I fingered hidden charms and the contact was damp; there was no spark left to sever the life-strings that should stretch from every finger-tip. My will was squelched in the spittle of an alien race, and all because I had committed this blasphemy of thought—that there might be the hand of the gods in a stranger's intervention. (56-57)

Indeed, one could say that Elesin hastily acknowledges his weakness, projected as a general human problem, *only* in order to move on to the true source of his predicament. Thus, he dismisses the attribution of his failure to “the renewal of famished embers lodged eternally in the heart of man” with the firm conviction that a man could easily “overcome” that. Apparently, what could not be so readily surmounted was the very colonial factor, the purportedly “catalytic incident, merely.” And hence the ubiquity of references to it in the rest of his self-justification: “the alien hand [that] pollutes the source of will,” the “stranger force of violence [that] shatters the mind’s calm resolution,” “the hands of unnameable strangers” in which he is turned into a mere infant, “the spittle of an alien race” in which his will is squelched. As Iyaloja never lets him forget for a second, Elesin held in chains and under surveillance is far from the man who boasted that he is master of his fate; who, as Jeyifo puts it, uttered the “fabulous conceit”⁵¹ of being the only one in the universe with no fear of death. And, for that matter, who did not need to boast his powers in this respect as the market women—and so, Iyaloja⁵²—proudly did so on his behalf to Sergeant Amusa: “Tonight our husband and father will prove himself greater than the laws of strangers” (28).

⁵¹ Biodun Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka*, 156.

⁵² Since Iyaloja means mother-at-the-market, but more precisely, leader of the market women.

Standing on Ceremony—or a Hollow Ritual of Honour?

But this argument not only runs counter to Soyinka's dogged insistence on the merely catalytic impact of the colonial factor but also that of Jeyifo, his one-time leading critic on the question of the marginalisation of the historical-materialist dimension of the play's conflict. With the publication in 2004 of *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism*, Jeyifo is arguably not only now Soyinka's pre-eminent interpreter but also his most famous defender on that claim. I base this reading, of course, not on the early critiques⁵³ but on the series of reflective and self-critical work from the late eighties culminating in the magisterial 2004 work, a painstaking and penetrating study of the complexity and sources of the alleged obscurity of Soyinka's oeuvre⁵⁴ in the context of the framing themes of radical subjectivity in the postcolony to which the playwright responds in a distinctly profound, paradoxical and deeply humanist way.⁵⁵ To

⁵³ Among them the following: "Soyinka Demythologized: Notes on a Materialist Reading of *A Dance of the Forests*, *The Road*, and *Kongi's Harvest*" (Ife, Nigeria: 1984), "Tragedy, History, and Ideology: Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Ebrahim Hussein's *Kinjeketile*" in *Marxism and African Literature*, ed. Georg M. Gugelberger (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1985), 94-109, or the version of it that appears as "Ideology and Tragic Epistemology: The Emergent Paradigms in Contemporary African Drama" in his *The Truthful Lie: Essays in a Sociology of African Drama* (London: New Beacon, 1985), 23-45.

⁵⁴ Jeyifo partly defines his objective as "a critical response to the influence of critical commentary on Soyinka's works in the last four decades, the purpose being to locate the 'difficulty' and 'complexity' of his writings in their appropriate linguistic and cultural sources" in relation to "the historic avant-garde movements of the contemporary world" and, further, in relation to "issues of interpretation and explanation" as they pertain "to the framing ideas and themes." See Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka*, xviii.

⁵⁵ Jeyifo's early position distilled from three essays is cogently summarized by Olakunle George as follows:

According to Biodun Jeyifo, the dramatist's [Soyinka's] mythopoesis needs to be rescued from a deep encrustation at the heart of its idealism: an undialectical attitude to myth and ritual. Jeyifo suggests that in privileging

conclude this section of my discussion, therefore, I will now examine Jeyifo's defence of Soyinka's claim to see how well my argument holds up against it. In doing so, however, my aim is not ultimately to argue for a right-or-wrong response to Soyinka's assertion but to stay with the founding ethos of his poetics aptly identified early on by Wilson Harris as constituted by the dialectic of "complexity and freedom,"⁵⁶

mythology and the transhistoricity of archetypes, Soyinka ends up being abstract and ahistorical; in so far as the logic of myth sublimates historical trauma, the playwright's vision risks being iconic but protean, wise but aloof, brooding but conservative. In Jeyifo's often quoted formulation, Soyinka's theory of art and being instances the familiar predicament of bourgeois aesthetics, one where 'thought, in a bewitched, becalmed, vaporous zone of absolute self-subsistence, frees itself from its moorings in the sea of real life processes.' See Olakunle George, "Cultural Criticism in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*," 68.

Jeyifo's revised and current position is hinged on the view that in Soyinka's most ambitious and successful works, among which *Horseman* must be included, will is not an ahistorical category, after all; that its reification does not prevent it from "meeting its limits in determinate institutional and socio-economic structures." In other words, Soyinka's vaunting of the metaphysical through ritual archetypes notwithstanding, history retains its hold by dint of "rigorous fidelity to the demands of complex and sophisticated artistic representation." See *Wole Soyinka*, 285-86. Jeyifo's revisionism, spurred by his reflections on the complexities, tensions and ambiguities of postcolonial or modern African literature—in short, the antinomies of postcolonial existence—began earnestly in his important 1988 essay, "Soyinka and the Tropes of Disalienation," the essence of which is that Soyinka's poetics evinces a "contradictory discourse" that is "variously traditionalist and modernist, pan-Africanist and liberal-humanist, individualistic and communalistic, gnostic and skeptical, unapologetically idealist and yet on occasion discreetly materialist." Jeyifo also points out what he calls Soyinka's ideological and theoretical struggle to articulate a view of the African world that "in its ideational systems and ideological superstructures is both essentialist and non-essentialist," thereby constituting "a willed aporia as much as a verifiable construct" resulting from a "a theoretical anxiety to affirm archaic, autochthonous insights and yet be at one with the march of human thought and progress." Jeyifo concludes that in this sense "aporia may well be the master trope for society, like contemporary Africa, wracked by profound antipodal impulses and rapid, vertiginous transformations." See "Wole Soyinka and the Tropes of Disalienation," Introduction to *Art, Dialogue and Outrage*, xxix, xxvii-viii. See also his introductory essay to the volume of critical essays on Soyinka edited by him, "Of Veils, Shrouds and Freedom: Soyinka and the Dialectics of Complexity and Simplicity in Postcolonial Discourse," in *Perspectives on Wole Soyinka: Freedom and Complexity* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), ix-xxii.

⁵⁶ I have discussed this notion in greater detail with respect to the poet and playwright, Derek Walcott—a writer with whom Soyinka is often compared—in Chapter Four, but see Wilson Harris, "The Complexity of Freedom" in *Perspectives on Wole Soyinka: Freedom and Complexity*, 51-61.

doing so by complicating Jeyifo's redrawn picture from the psychoanalytic standpoint I have adopted. The questions I shall be attempting to answer are: first, assuming that Soyinka is right in his claim for the additional reason that Jeyifo gives on the nature of ritual, what then is the value of the reified concept of honour that would be salvaged from the collapse of the superstructural or juridico-political foundation that gives it meaning in the first place? And, second, in tracing the sources of Elesin's divided will, is there a place or not for the colonial factor, and if yes, how significant?

Jeyifo urges us to "take seriously" Soyinka's insistence that the intervention of the colonial district officer, Pilkings, is a mere catalyst for "the more decisive protagonist agency of Elesin's divided, conflicted will." Jeyifo comes to this position by the light of what he calls the "fragility of ritual and its sanctions and claims," for as he argues,

Ritual efficacy is not, *ab initio*, guaranteed; rather it is predicated on so many other factors beyond the control of the internal economy of the ritual act itself. One of these factors is the precondition that the ritual act must not be interrupted or foreclosed before its completion. This is why we must take seriously Soyinka's insistence that the intervention of the Colonial District Officer is only a catalyst for the more decisive protagonist agency of Elesin's divided, conflicted will. The tragic flaw of the protagonist of this play is thus Elesin's willful misrecognition of his divided volition, willful because it is only by acting out and vibrantly playing the elaborate conceits of his mastery of death and his self-projection as an avatar of earth's regenerative powers that he is able to live the lie of being an

absolutely willing ritual scapegoat. The lie of course catches up with him—and the ritual is aborted.⁵⁷

It seems to me that a contradiction tugs at the edges of Jeyifo's argument, and it is as follows. In order for Soyinka's claim to stand, for us to take it seriously as Jeyifo implores, the external factor responsible for the abortion of Elesin's ritual suicide has to be irrelevant, *in essence*, to its successful performance. In other words, this would be in accord with the anecdotal gloss on the word "catalyst" that I offered above. The colonial factor may present the occasion for, but not in any way determine, the enactment of Elesin's "more decisive protagonist agency," for, as Jeyifo asserts, the efficacy of a ritual is contingent on its not being "interrupted or foreclosed before its completion." After all, the only way to show the merely incidental and so inconsequential character of the colonial presence is for the ritual to proceed to completion, in spite of Pilkings's most ardent desire and intent. This, surely, is the confidence that the market women expressed in taunting and telling off Sergeant Amusa:

AMUSA The government say dat kin' ting must stop.

WOMEN Who will stop it? You? Tonight our husband and father will prove himself greater than the laws of strangers.

Yet, as Jeyifo rightly admits, the ritual is aborted. But not, as we must point out, *suo moto* or on Elesin's own initiative, but on the

⁵⁷ Biodun Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka*, 156.

active agency of the colonial factor. Consequently, there is warrant for a reading that sees Jeyifo as suggesting that the very unwilling and forcible abortion of Elesin's ritual suicide—which guarantees its failure to affirm his agency—is the ground on which to take seriously the claim that the effective thwarting agent is merely incidental. Jeyifo is right of course to note the role played by Elesin's divided will and the *fabulous* mental conceit of having mastered death, leading him to the *practical* diversionary conceit of what I have called his death-hour wedding. But, again, what is the ultimate cause of that conflicted will; what divides and fractures it? As ambiguous—deliberately so, it would appear—as the plot is on the question of the precise time Elesin was expected to die, a strong argument can be made for the view that he had not in fact forfeited the appointed moment by his dalliance. At the beginning of Act Five, when Pilkings seeks to reconcile with the imprisoned Elesin on the wrong notion that he might perhaps find his favour having saved his life, Elesin implies that he began the moving trance-dance that ends Act Three, in which his ritual dissolution is well underway, *upon receiving word* from the house of *osugbo*, the secret executive cult in charge of summoning him to his duty. Here is the speech he makes to correct Pilkings's mistaken belief:

You are waiting for dawn white man. I hear you saying to yourself: only so many hours until dawn and then the danger is over. All I must do is keep him alive tonight. You don't quite understand it all but you know that tonight is when what ought to be must be brought about. I shall ease your mind even more, ghostly one. It is not an entire night but a moment of the night,

and that moment is past. The moon was my messenger and guide. When it reached a certain gateway in the sky, it touched that moment for which my whole life has been spent in blessings. Even I do not know the gateway. I have stood here and scanned the sky for a glimpse of that door but, I cannot see it. Human eyes are useless for a search of this nature. But in the house of *osugbo*, those who keep watch through the spirit recognised the moment, they sent word to me through the voice of our sacred drums to prepare myself. I heard them and I shed all thoughts of earth. I began to follow the moon to the abode of the gods ... servant of the white king, that was when you entered my chosen place of departure on feet of desecration. (51)

We might, like the implacable Iyaloja, say that Elesin is here only rationalising his failure in the hope of gaining “peace of mind” (57), but there is nothing in the text that persuasively or at all rebuts his account. If anything, he is corroborated by Praise-singer who bears witness that Elesin—wait for it—may in fact have hurried into the void of transition a tad too early! That Elesin rushed into the abyss of dissolution like an impatient bride, he says, when “[i]t is “not yet noon in heaven.” What is also worth noting in Praise-singer’s testimony is the report that Elesin was at the very least already half-way into the world of the ancestors. In other words, whereas the haste with which Elesin lunges for the market at the very beginning of the drama is in the hope of staying his feet longer on the earth in order to fulfil his last desires of the flesh, Praise-singer—and we might add, Soyinka by way of his stage directions—testifies to a different intent here:

How shall I tell what my eyes have seen? The Horseman gallops on before the courier, how shall I tell what my eyes have seen? He says a dog may be confused by new scents of beings he never dreamt of, so he must precede the dog to heaven. He says a horse may stumble on strange boulders and be lamed, so he races on before the horse to heaven. It is best, he says, to trust no messenger who may falter at the outer gate; oh how shall I tell what my ears have heard? But do you hear me still Elesin, do you hear your faithful one?

[ELESIN in his motions appears to feel for a direction of sound, subtly, but he only sinks deeper into his dance-trance.]

Elesin Alafin, I no longer sense your flesh. The drums are changing now but you have gone far ahead of the world. It is not yet noon in heaven; let those who claim it is begin their own journey home. So why must you rush like an impatient bride: why do you race to desert your Olohun-iyó?

[ELESIN is now sunk fully deep in his trance, there is no longer sign of any awareness of his surroundings.] (35)

Praise-singer next launches into a long poetic goodbye and lamentation of Elesin's imminent complete departure into the abyss of dissolution, ending with the plaintive cry, "If the world were not greater than the wishes of Olohun-iyó, I would not let you go" (36). Act Three ends with stage directions that emphasise Elesin's deeper

progression into the gulf of transition. I have quoted Praise-singer at length because of the crucial bearing the question of the time of Elesin's arrest has on Soyinka's claim and Jeyifo's endorsement. Moreover, that Elesin may not have dallied to his and the Oyo world's peril, which then locates the thwarting of his will in the colonial intervention, is a perfectly legitimate interpretation of the sequence of events the plot unfolds and is one that many readers share, as eloquently shown by Tanure Ojaide in an interesting account of his classroom experiences teaching *Horseman*. According to Ojaide, the most difficult and perhaps debatable aspect of the play revealed to him when he taught it at two colleges in the United States is that his students could not understand why Iyaloja, Olunde, Praise-singer and others "blame Elesin for not doing his duty when already arrested." To many of the students, he adds, Elesin "goes very far in the trance and has no way of killing himself once arrested."⁵⁸ On the face of it, Ojaide's counter that Elesin kills himself in the end "in spite of chains"—indeed, with those very chains—"when he really wants to" is persuasive, but falls apart under the light provided by Elesin's response to Pilkings's solicitation quoted above and Jeyifo's clarification on the precondition for effective ritual. To be sure, the "weight of longing" on Elesin's "earth-held limbs" may have come from his need for a bride "as the abyss across which my body must be drawn" but in his self-justification to Iyaloja a few pages later, he is quick to assign a greater, ultimately more determining role, to the

⁵⁸ Tanure Ojaide, "Death and the King's Horseman in the Classroom," in *Death and the King's Horseman*, 115-120, at 119; originally published in *College Literature* 19/20, nos. 3-1 (October 1992): 210-14.

colonial intervention. As he “confesses” to his sobbing bride, he could have shaken off his earthly longing, for “already my foot had begun to lift” but that was precisely when the “the white ghost entered and all was defiled” (53). The keywords here are “but then” and “all was defiled.” In other words, the moment of colonial intervention effectively defiled and thwarted the ritual, such that any further step towards its completion was doomed to futility. This is the import of Iyaloja’s acidic judgement on Elesin’s eventual suicide, what Ojaide suggests could still have saved the day. “Why do you strain yourself,” she says to Elesin’s fallen body. “Why do you labour at tasks for which no one, not even the man lying there [meaning Olunde], would give you thanks? He is gone at last into the passage but oh, how late it all is. His son will feast on the meat and throw him bones. The passage is clogged with droppings from the king’s stallion; he will arrive all stained in dung” (62). In any case, it seems Elesin might have killed himself sooner in fulfilment of the ritual had he been able to locate the right alignment of the moon from his prison cell. As he tells Pilkings, he had stood in his cell and “scanned the sky for a glimpse of that door” but could not see it. Obviously, the Oyo gods were not going to subject themselves to the further ignominy of perfecting a sacred ritual in the dungeon of an alien enemy race that has conquered their abode.

If Jeyifo is right about the condition for ritual effectiveness, then unless it can be convincingly shown that only Elesin’s politically untouched, but internally divided and conflicted will, delayed his suicide *beyond the appointed and sacred moment*—and the evidence suggests otherwise—then what we are left with is the purportedly

merely catalytic incident of the colonial factor as the decisive and determining cause of his abortive suicide. For the critical consensus is that even Olunde's suicide which came earlier and so must have been in time, hence his being "the swiftest ever messenger of a king" (61), is also futile. In the view of Williams, Olunde's suicide "only compounds" the misery of an Oyo kingdom crumbling under the weight of the external threat of colonialism. Williams can see no redeeming quality in what another critic describes as a "self-important" act aimed at arresting, by a mere gesture of will, the socio-political process that Elesin's failure lays bare. While for Williams it is unclear whether Olunde's suicide makes him a cultural hero or "the rearguard defender of a backward-looking political order," for George it is symbolic of an "aristocratic concern for the metaphysical 'balance' of the Yoruba world as by the transforming gaze of the colonial eye."⁵⁹ Either way, a hollow ritual of honour is all that Elesin's timely or untimely suicide, as well as Olunde's swift and presumably timely self-sacrifice, might yield. The fact of the matter, however, is that the effective foreclosure of ritual began not with Elesin's arrest and imprisonment but at the very moment colonialism successfully entrenched itself, complete with the appurtenances of power. Nothing testifies to this better than the symbolism of Elesin's prison, a former slave-holding cell in the seat of colonial power, or the fact that a direct representative of the colonising power, H.R.H the Prince, is on an official tour of his possessions at the time. Any obdurate insistence on an intact and unfragmented political

⁵⁹ See Adebayo Williams, "Ritual and the Political Unconscious," 75, and Olakunle George, "Cultural Criticism in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*," 86.

will—and the context is none other than political—smacks of a nostalgia for what has been lost, which would be no more than standing on ceremony to save face. Hence, the abstract or idealistic ethical code in which Elesin is flagellated by Iyaloja and which compels Olunde's sanctimonious substitutive suicide: honour; because it cannot be endured that "honour fly out of doors." But we may ask, what would have happened had Pilkings not listened to his wife, Jane, and stuck to his original disdain and indifference. "I don't have to stop anything," he tells Jane. "If they want to throw themselves off the top of the cliff or poison themselves for the sake of some barbaric custom what is that to me?" (25). There is no prize for the answer, but my guess is that the District Officer's bungalow, the Residency, together with its old slave-holding annexe, as well as the Native Administration Police, would have remained, and the apprehension—the apocalyptic fear—that Praise-singer expresses at the beginning of the drama, repeated as I have shown by all the major characters down to the dead Alafin, would still have constituted a constant reminder of the threat they faced. It is the calm assurance of this new political reality that informs Pilkings's solicitousness, on the understanding that by now a sobered Elesin would know better. And, indeed, Elesin is clear about the undeniable fact of colonial suzerainty. Thus when Pilkings insists on Elesin's word (of honour) that if Iyaloja is allowed into the cell he will not let her pass anything to him, here is Elesin's reply: "You have my honour already. It is locked up in that desk in which you will put away the report of this night's events. Even the honour of my people you have already; it is tied together with those papers of treachery

which make you masters in this land” (55). Elesin’s answer hardly needs a gloss: there was no honour left to defend or affirm once treacherous treaties backed by superior military strength had made Pilkings master in the land. It is therefore out of the charitable heart of the conqueror that Pilkings wishes to save Elesin from himself. Not surprisingly, then, he accuses Elesin of bringing politics into a merely humanitarian concern for human life threatened by a primitive custom and right then adopts a higher accent of power: “Alright, I am trying to make things easy,” he says, “but if you must bring in politics we’ll have to do it the hard way”(55).

This may seem a stretch, but I will hazard it anyway. When Pilkings then proceeds to draw a line on the ground that Iyaloja may not cross, once granted audience with Elesin, the reality that she has studiously refused to acknowledge begins to dawn on her. It is a line that marks the balance of power and the alignment of forces: on the one side, an imprisoned Elesin symbolising a conquered kingdom; on the other Pilkings representing the new “masters in this land.” Thus, when in the excitement of Iyaloja’s castigation of Elesin she does step over the line and the guards blow their whistles to alert Pilkings ,while simultaneously rushing to restrain Elesin, her lament points to an understanding of what Elesin already knows. Once, she rightly notes, Elesin had no need to open his mouth in explanation “because evil-smelling goats ... had lost their senses.” And it would take exceptional bravery for a man to dare lay hands on him simply because “Iyaloja stepped from one side of the earth onto another.” Indeed, it is Iyaloja who unwittingly corroborates the claim of standing on ceremony that I

make here. Reduced to begging leave for Elesin to fulfil “the lesser oaths he need not break,” she seeks to persuade by appealing to Pilkings’s sense of decorum: “White one, you have a king here, a visitor from your land. We know of his presence here. Tell me, were he to die would you leave his spirit roaming endlessly on the surface of earth? Would you bury him here among those you consider less than human? In your land have you no ceremonies of the dead?” When Pilkings fails at first to be persuaded by her argument, Iyaloja finally acknowledges the new reality, even if by way of attributing hers and the communal humiliation solely to Elesin whose “weakened will holds us in bondage to you” (58). However this loss of decisive agency was wrought, Iyaloja’s choice of words makes it clear that the Oyo kingdom is now in bondage, enslaved to the will of another juridical authority, and it is only by *supplicatory* gestures where hitherto the autonomous will to action would brook no challenge,⁶⁰ that Elesin may be allowed to perform even his lesser duty. In short, colonial domination has so thoroughly penetrated the Oyo kingdom whose honour Elesin had sought to defend that he can admit Pilkings now “advised all our lives” (52). The “idiom of power” evoked by Iyaloja and Elesin at this crucial moment of the play thus acknowledges the “social death” of the autochthonous community in its current mode of organisation symbolised by a kingship system in rapid decline and reminds of Orlando Patterson’s brilliant expostulation of slavery as a form of

⁶⁰ Though it must be pointed out that Samuel Johnson, the eminent Yoruba historian, records several instances of resistance to the demand of ritual suicide by the Elesin upon the king’s death to the point where by the end of the nineteenth century “all” the chiefs expected to accompany a dead Alaafin refused to die, but more on this below.

social death distinguished ultimately by the slave's lack of honour. As Patterson points out, "it is possible to honor any person, or any animal (such as a cow), or any thing (such as a totem). But to be honoured does not imply that one is honourable."⁶¹ Elesin, too, is clear about the relation between dishonour and death: "Life is honour. / It ends when honour ends" (11). If so, then all that Iyaloja pleads for when every pretence to honour is clearly lost is no more than the opportunity to observe the outward form of ceremony so that honour may appear to have been kept within doors.

But saving face cannot be an adequate reason for the grave and solemn custom of ritual suicide, and this is where Jeyifo's observation that Soyinka achieves the goal of an immanent critique of the very mythological premise of his African world view by making a reified will meet its limits in almost every instance in his major plays is a profound insight that preserves the aestheticised social vision espoused in *Horseman*.⁶² In my reading then, it is not so much a

⁶¹ See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 331. On Patterson's conception of "the idiom of power" and "social death," see Chapters 1 and 2.

⁶² I should add that Williams and George also defend Soyinka's vision in *Horseman* in slightly different ways. Says Williams: "In the final analysis, what Soyinka accomplished in *Death and the King's Horseman* was to counterpose the dominant culture of the ancient Oyo kingdom against the equally hegemonic culture of the white invaders. His strategy is a brilliant, decolonizing venture. In an age characterized by new forms of cultural domination that result from the economic marginalization of the third world, such an approach might well represent a more pressing project than analyzing the class content of indigenous cultures." See Williams, "Ritual and the Political Unconscious," 77. For his part, George whose reading also seeks to unmask Soyinka's disavowal of the colonial factor in *Horseman* insists that there are lessons to be learnt nevertheless from a close, deconstructive reading: "If it is accepted that Soyinka's disavowal is strategic; if it is further accepted that orthodox Marxist criticism failed to follow the play to the recesses of its ideological hideout, at least one can in both cases point to a reason, a motivation (conscious or not), for the author's disavowal and the critics' under-complication of it. What, the question will then be, motivates the kind of reading I am proposing here? One obvious response is that [it] accords the play the analytical attention

fragmented will or the foreclosure of the specific ritual of Elesin's voluntary suicide as such that constitutes the tragedy of *Horseman*. For we may ask, at what point does the Yoruba will as expressed through its protagonist actor, Elesin, become so irremediably divided and fractured that the hegemonic power of its sustaining ideology is unable to paper over the fissures? George, Williams and Jeyifo have, to my mind, more than answered this question on the cultural-political level. On the psychological level, I have suggested that Elesin's conflicted will is a reflection of his death trauma which merely instances the collective or social death trauma. And that, consequently, his and the Oyo community's assertion of the fabulous conceit of mastery and agency in the face of a radically changed political order betrays their unpreparedness for anxiety. In general, anxiety has an anticipatory quality; "an unmistakable relation to expectation," as Freud puts it. The anxiety signal, Freud says, announces: "the present situation reminds me of one of the traumatic experiences I have had before. Therefore I will anticipate the trauma and behave as though it had already come, while there is yet time to turn aside." But the expectation is really a foreboding, a threat or danger about which one feels a sense of helplessness. The anxious person's "estimation of his own strength compared to the magnitude of the danger" leads him or her to admit "helplessness in the face of it."⁶³

commensurate to its complexity. It pays due attention to the multiple levels at which the play thrashes out the problem that constitutes its object.... the intricate contradictions that British colonialism set in motion as a consequence of its advance into the lives and minds of the African community captured by Soyinka's imagination." See Olakunle George, "Cultural Criticism in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*," 87.

⁶³ Quoted in Robert Jay Lifton, *The Broken Connection*, 126.

Freud concludes that realistic anxiety, as opposed to neurotic anxiety, represents “a state of increased sensory attention and motor tension” that can be described as “preparedness for anxiety.” Two reactions are possible in the face of such a threat: “flight or defence,” or a paralysed affective state unable to meet the threat.⁶⁴ In the chapter, “Anxiety and Numbing,” Robert Jay Lifton reviews a host of writers on the subject of anxiety from Freud to Heidegger and Leslie Farber and provides several useful insights, almost all of them worth citing. I will take only two of them. Rollo May defines the term as “the apprehension cued off by a threat to some value which the individual holds essential to his existence as a personality” including the experience of danger or peril to oneself and a “breaking down or dissolution of the world,” while Leslie Farber usefully describes it as entailing the “range of distress which attends willing what cannot be willed,” a psychic state that denotes intention that cannot be realised. These definitions of anxiety bring it closer to the life continuity paradigm I am using for my analysis via Lifton, who concludes his review with a restatement of Freud in terms of what happens when tension (useful for equilibrium) gives way to anxiety which has to do with “grounding and centering”:

Grounding is impaired in the sense that one’s “roots” are part of the disintegration. The self cannot seem to counter the threat with strength derived either from its history or its biological ties. Part of the helplessness and foreboding has to do with the feeling of having been put adrift from ordinary manageable existence and thrust into an alien realm dominated by the

⁶⁴ Sigmund Freud, “Anxiety and Instinctual Life” in *The Freud Reader*, 774.

threat. The threat is both familiar and alien. ... it cannot be assimilated. Something in it cannot be formulated or felt—and in that sense numbing exists even where the mind seems to be overactive.⁶⁵

My detailed discussion up to this point makes a further gloss on this passage unnecessary. But the sense of a lack of precise knowledge about the danger—in short, the sense of foreboding—does merit one more word. For when Elesin cries out at the height of Iyaloja's merciless taunting, "I need neither your pity nor the pity of the world. I need understanding. Even I need to understand," he is in essence saying, I need to work-through, come to terms, with this trauma. A failure to do so, as we have already seen, marks a repression of the trauma and leads inexorably to the phenomenon of acting out as the mind continues its effort at mastery. But if a play is an artifice, a fictional or imaginative re-presentation of events and experience (however close to reality or an actual historical event), then the role of the author becomes relevant where it can illuminate the text. I will conclude this chapter then with a brief examination of the anxieties, the psychological tensions, that may have joined with Soyinka's overt political telos when writing *Horseman*. If any authority is needed for this sort of methodological harping back in an epoch that celebrates the death of the author and strenuously contests the notion of a subject-centred intentionalism in literary discourse, Jeyifo's will do. Jeyifo not only declares as a distinctive aspect of *Wole Soyinka*

⁶⁵ Robert Jay Lifton, *The Broken Connection*, 131. See 127-28 for the quotes from Rollo and Farber.

“considerable emphasis on the active relationship between Soyinka’s textual constructions of his ‘personality’” and his openness to possibilities for expanding the scope of freedom but also goes on to designate his unique and complex mode of self-fashioning “homologies of the self and the social.”⁶⁶ There is much to be learned, I think, in approaching *Horseman* from the additional nexus of the author’s equally complex grappling with the anomalies of affect that the bitter history he engages produced and still produce.

Repression and Transference: Soyinka and the Writing of Disaster

According to Freud, anxiety creates repression of unpleasure, or uncomfortable truths in this case.⁶⁷ If so, and if it is true that as Williams insists against Soyinka’s protestations *Horseman* is his “creative equivalent of a return of the repressed,”⁶⁸ what then does Soyinka repress in his re-presentation of an actual historical event modified in several minor, but nonetheless important, details? For as Jeyifo notes, the aspects of departure from the historical material are “so crucial to Soyinka’s purposes as to constitute the play’s basic dramaturgical supports.”⁶⁹ And they are: moving back the date of the actual historical event which he believed occurred in 1946—but,

⁶⁶ Biodun Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka*, xx-xxi.

⁶⁷ Repression, needless to say, is a basic concept of psychoanalysis; as such, one encounters it everywhere in Freud and his followers. I have made particular reference, however, to Freud’s “Anxiety and Instinctual Life,” a lecture that came later in his career and in which, according to Peter Gay, he took full account of the revisions he had undertaken in his theories in the 1920s to “offer a detailed survey of his new views on anxiety.” See *The Freud Reader*, 773-783.

⁶⁸ Adebayo Williams, “Ritual and the Political Unconscious,” 72.

⁶⁹ Biodun Jeyifo, *The Truthful Lie: Essays in a Sociology of African Drama*, 27.

actually, 1945, as Izevbaye, and, in particular, James Gibbs, point out⁷⁰—by two or three years so that the action of the play coincides with the Second World War; Elesin’s death-hour wedding to an already betrothed maiden; the visit of His Royal Highness, the Prince; Olunde’s departure for medical studies in England and his timely return; and the suicide of Elesin. Even a cursory reader would agree that sans these changes the play loses its dramatic vigour and ideological salience. But perhaps most important of all is the total silence about any discontent or resistance in the Oyo kingdom to the tradition of ritual suicide. Dan Izevbaye, one of the earliest commentators to point to this elided aspect of Oyo history in the two well-known dramatic representations of the event, writes as follows:

Johnson the Yoruba historian notes that at one time delay or reluctance on the part of chiefs who are expected to accompany a dead Alaafin had such grave moral implications that members of the offending official’s lineage would rather strangle him than suffer the stain of ignominy. But he could add that by the end of the nineteenth century when he compiled his history “all the men now refused to die and they are never forced to do so. ... The Oyo period which provided the material for *Oba Waja* and *Death and the King’s Horseman* had become less demanding on her citizens than the plays emphasize. Voluntary suicide had become little more than an “act of love” by citizens.⁷¹

⁷⁰ See Dan Izevbaye, “Mediation in Soyinka,” 122 and James Gibbs, *Wole Soyinka* (London: Macmillian, 1986), 117-18.

⁷¹ See Dan Izevbaye, “Mediation in Soyinka: The Case of the King’s Horseman” in *Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka*, ed. James Gibbs (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1980), 116-125, at 122.

Yet, what we have in Soyinka's account is a tradition of ritual suicide joyfully embraced and celebrated by all past horsemen of the Alafin. Indeed Elesin is at his lyrical best when expressing this implausibly romantic view of self-sacrifice: he would, he says, only be dancing to his death along the path "Glazed by the soles of my great precursors." Mobilizing every poetic and rhetorical strategy for the task, Soyinka paints the dazzling picture of untrammelled power and glory such as might have been the case in an ancient Oyo kingdom but certainly not in the tottering and fearful regime that has already lost its power to colonialism in mid-Twentieth century. And here, perhaps, is where we find a significant indication of the play and potency of the repressed in the text.

A view exists in trauma studies on the possible intermingling of the notions of originary and post-originary trauma that tends towards "the impossible quest for a return to the putative originary, pretraumatic condition of full unity, identity, or communion."⁷² In this light, we may liken to such an "originary, pretraumatic" historical moment the pristine pre-colonial epoch of Oyo history wherein Soyinka bases his idea of an auto-dynamic or self-sufficient African world, a culture "whose reference points are taken from within the culture itself."⁷³ This is the period of absolute autonomy when the Ogunian will-to-action was subject to no determining factor other than the integrity of the Yoruba world's protagonist actor. It is only in this

⁷² Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 89.

⁷³ Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, viii.

setting that the mysteries of Yoruba tragedy and its peculiar way of grappling with the trauma of death can be on its own terms—on its “actual soil,” as Soyinka emphasises in his author’s note. For Soyinka’s urgent and overarching goal is to contest the epistemological grounds of Europe’s assumed superiority and the imperialist desires it powered to such unquantifiable cultural and political costs in the colonies and other peripheries of empire. For this purpose, Soyinka creates Olunde who has to have gone to England to read medicine and so lived among the enemy. Olunde’s sparring with Jane on the question of the barbarism of ritual suicide provides, arguably, the best moments of the play in terms of the calm confidence with which he takes away the assumed moral grounds—the civilising mission claims—of colonialism. As Olunde, in one of several retorts, tells Jane, colonial arrogance assumes that “everything which appears to make sense was learnt from you.” Olunde derives a great deal of his authority from having studied the enemy on her own soil, so to speak. So he tells Jane, “You forget that I have now spent four years among your people. I discovered that you have no respect for what you do not understand.” By the time Jane offers Olunde on a platter the perfect argument against denigrating ritual suicide as primitive—the story of the captain who blows himself up in his boat in order to save other ships, the harbour and the populations on the coast—Soyinka leaves no one in doubt as to how strenuously he meant to defend his “actual soil.” The captain’s story, considered “morbid news” by Jane but as “an affirmative commentary on life” by Olunde, comes at the very beginning of their meeting. Towards the end of their conversation,

Olunde, feeling every inch of his turf won, cannot help sounding triumphant: "I had plenty of time to study your people. I saw nothing, finally, that gave you the right to pass judgement on other peoples and their ways. Nothing at all." But Soyinka's point does not merely turn on negation, is not fully made by taking away the assumed grounds. It is about the cultural self-sufficiency that prepared Olunde for his mission of infiltrating and observing the enemy at close quarters. In other words, his mental sinews were formed within the culture itself before ever setting foot in England. So to Jane's notion that Olunde must be referring to racism as that which disqualifies her people from arrogating the wisdom of the world to themselves, Olunde tells her not to assume that when he left, he "took nothing at all with me."⁷⁴

Several commentators have fingered Olunde as Soyinka's ideological spokesman and it is easy to see why. Olunde launches his insurrectionary sallies against a totalising imperial knowledge system at just about the same time as Soyinka's forceful articulation of the idea of a unique African world in the landmark *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Nor for that matter is it surprising that the Olunde-Jane scene echoes the well-known "telephone conversation" in 1962 between a young African looking for affordable accommodation in London and a well-to-do English landlady. The speaker of that poem, like Olunde, goes to battle on behalf of Soyinka and just as handily as in *Horseman*, gets the upper hand of the English lady in a debate.⁷⁵ Not to belabour the point, suffice it to say that Soyinka has not one

⁷⁴ Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman*, 41-44.

⁷⁵ See Wole Soyinka, "Telephone Conversation" in *Modern Poetry from Africa*, eds. Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 111-112.

but several spokespersons in *Horseman*, if we take cognisance of the not-negligible job of asserting the validity of the Yoruba world's cultural referents by the chorus of girls at the market, as it were in anticipation of Olunde. But Olunde and the girls acquire their capacity for an effective oppositional agency mostly from the knowledge they have gained as the new elite educated in the western knowledge system. In short, as recently as 2009, Soyinka gives further reason to suspect the resentment and repressive structure at work during the time he composed this play. In an article that followed the recent production of *Death and the King's Horseman* at the National Theatre in London, Andrew Gumbel reports a conversation with Soyinka in the course of which Soyinka disclosed what "triggered" his writing of the play:

Wole Soyinka is explaining what moved him, in the mid-1970s, to write his play *Death and the King's Horseman*. And that means, inevitably, telling a story. At the time, he was a fellow at Churchill College, Cambridge, he says, one of the Nobel laureate's many periods of exile from home in Nigeria. Every day, as he came down the college staircase, he would pass a bust of Winston Churchill, that old bulldog of British colonialism. And, every day, he caught himself thinking the same thing. "I had an overwhelming desire," he says, smiling, "to push it and watch it crash."

There we have it. Soyinka, finding himself right inside the belly of the colonial whale is suddenly possessed by an iconoclastic fervour. But

as Gumbel further reports, he never does in fact act out his desire, compelled, we might say, to be of good behaviour in the presence of his hosts who happen also to be the same who have shattered his world and dispossessed him, one of the consequences of which is that he is periodically forced into bitter exile from home. Nonetheless, it is this repressed desire that forms the “triggering mechanism,”⁷⁶ Soyinka says, for *Horseman* and other works that followed. So a traumatic history, repression, desire and a triggering mechanism: can we be any closer to the psychoanalytic?

Which makes it no surprise at all that Soyinka insists on an endogenous, self-sufficient knowledge-world in the play triggered by his memory of dispossession. Nor that in doing so he is compelled to return to a pre-traumatic historical epoch for his narrative, “lest the rationale for mustering a stiff resistance disappears,” as Williams notes. More important, Williams adds that the conflict presented by this choice is indeed “the political unconscious of the writer himself” that, his protestations aside, is revealed in the “imaginary resolution of a concrete cultural dilemma.”⁷⁷ But Jeyifo is more specific on this question of what I am arguing is the tendency of trauma victims to hanker after an impossible return to a pre-traumatic condition, the “dilemma” and “impossibility” of what he calls a “pure anteriority”:

The significance of Soyinka’s deployment of highly inventive rhetorical “riffs” and conceits ... in *Myth, Literature and the*

⁷⁶ See Andrew Gumbel, “Wole Soyinka on How He Came to Write *Death and the King’s Horseman*,” *The Guardian* (UK) of 8 April 2009.

⁷⁷ Adebayo Williams, “Ritual and the Political Unconscious,” 78.

African World for negotiating the inescapable dilemma of the project begun in the book—“race retrieval”—is incalculable. This dilemma, simply stated, is the dilemma of *pure anteriority*, a dilemma which involves the near impossibility of eliciting the constitutive elements of an “African world” with its own internal cohering reference points absolutely without recourse to any external sources. Which culture or tradition in the history of human cultural evolution can meet this rigorously *autochthonous* requirement? How far back do you go to “recover” the absolutely pristine values and matrices of the African “racial” heritage in culture?⁷⁸

The answer to Jeyifo’s closing rhetorical questions is already evident in his repeated use of the word “dilemma” reinforced by the phrase “near impossibility.” Yet how far Soyinka is prepared to go is also already clear from all of the foregoing: to the point before a major threat from without threatened the spiritual and material foundations of the African world. Although Soyinka looks beyond the Western-Christian triangular trade to the earlier Oriental-Muslim trans-Saharan slave trade, it is nonetheless the moment that Praise-singer dolefully tells us when the “white slavers” came and “took away the heart of the race ... bore away the mind and muscle of the race.”

This, then, is the burden of Soyinka’s political unconscious, the realm of his trauma and what he was thus driven to repress. It bears restating that I am drawing on trauma and psychoanalytic concepts both in a general but also narrow sense; in other words,

⁷⁸ Biodun Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka*, 67; original emphases.

psychoanalysis as a tool of social analysis rather than as clinical practice and so as something that social scientists, clinical therapists and literary critics can work with. In concluding this chapter, I will now discuss the concept of transference in order to elucidate the possible manner in which the writer—as indeed any so-called objective interpreter of historical trauma—can be implicated in the object of her study, including the tendency to repeat in varying and often veiled ways the traumatic forces in the object studied. I should like to cite two essays as examples of this sort of approach to understanding the text through the author’s self-presence or imbrication in it: LaCapra’s examination of the transferential dynamics revealed by Paul de Man’s World War II journalistic writings through the intriguing efforts by his followers to defend him against charges of anti-Semitism in the essay, “Paul de Man as Object of Transference,” and Cathy Caruth’s “Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History” in which she locates Freud’s implication in his speculative theory of history as the history of trauma in his *Moses and Monotheism*.⁷⁹

Transference is, simply, the transfer of emotions in an earlier traumatic relation or situation by the patient or victim onto the analyst or physician; the emotions can be positive or negative. As Freud explains it, transferences are “new editions or facsimiles” of impulses and phantasies aroused and made conscious in the course of analysis. Freud usefully adds that while some of the transferences do not differ from their model in any way except for the substitution,

⁷⁹ See Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust*, 111-136, and Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 10-24; especially the closing section, “From Captivity to Freedom, or Freud’s Exodus.”

others are “more ingeniously constructed” as their content has been subjected to “a moderating influence—to sublimation.”⁸⁰ Thus, while the clinical picture of transference that emerges from this definition is of an intricate context-specific concept, Freud’s clarifications make it possible to extend and apply it to the social realm where the traumatic event that produces the transference symptoms occurred in the first place. In its sublimated form, it becomes easier to see how the writer may repeat or revive painful psychological experiences transmitted from the past in the present. In this sense, Soyinka comes very close to this dynamic in his catalogue of a range of past traumas and the way the colonial present repeats them; the way, in short, that the colonial and neo-colonial present of *Horseman* and *Myth, Literature and the African World* trigger memories of the previous traumas. At the purely conceptual level, his often-quoted remark on the living impact of the colonial and neo-colonial project seems once again to be on all fours with the structure of a transference:

Both in cultural and political publications, and at such encounters as the UNESCO Conference on the Influence of Colonialism on African Cultures, Dar es Salaam 1972, the 6th Pan-African Congress, Dar es Salaam 1974, the pre-Colloque of the Black Arts Festival, Dakar 1974 etc., etc., we black Africans have been blandly invited to submit ourselves to a second epoch of colonialism – this time by a universal-humanoid abstraction defined and conducted by individuals whose theories and

⁸⁰ See for instance Sigmund Freud, “An Autobiographical Study” and “Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria (Dora)” in *The Freud Reader*, 3-41 at 26 and 172-239 at 234, respectively.

prescriptions are derived from the apprehension of *their* world and *their* history, *their* social neuroses and *their* value systems.⁸¹

Soyinka's inclusion of "social neuroses" in this list is instructive, as his call for a response to the imperial mission of re-colonisation, "this new threat." If, in leading by example, Soyinka, in a major dramatic response, elects to set the action constituted by the lived history of the time of his play in a pristine, literally immemorial pre-traumatic past, it seems safe in the light of the foregoing to attribute this gesture to the force of repression and transference that in the end marks his now famous relegation of the colonial factor to the status of "a catalytic incident, merely."

On a last note, I should like to suggest that precisely because of the necessarily ingenious or sublimated form of the transference factor in the African writer's re-presentation of the traumatic history of the encounter with the West, the postcolonial critic and theorist must increasingly pay attention to the psychological dimension of that history. This will, in a way, be merely fulfilling Fanon's unfinished project in *Black Skin*. Questions that bespeak trauma and beg answers or elaborations include at least the following two. First, the extent to which the African or postcolonial writer is traumatised by the necessity of fashioning a unique personal and collective identity *in the language and literary forms of the alien culture*. For while Obi Wali's apocalyptic fear of "the dead end of African literature"⁸² may have been

⁸¹ Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, x.

⁸² See Obi Wali, "The Dead End of African Literatures," *Transition*, No. 10 (1963), 13-18.

dispelled by the creative domestication of the colonial languages, it is also true that the postcolonial writer has not undergone the necessary task of *mourning* the literary death of the mother-tongue. Yet, given the stark reality of the near impossibility of artificially creating native print languages that would justify their existence as vital indices and carriers of culture, it seems clear that a process of coming to terms with “the real loss of a loved object”⁸³—in this case the native language as a medium of literary expression on the global stage—is needed. As George observes of Soyinka, the very imperative of contesting European cultural arrogance by denying Europe the status of “originating protagonist” in *Horseman* confirms Europe in that self-proclaimed status, which cannot be a negligible cause of trauma. It is worth quoting George further on this point:

Soyinka contests European cultural arrogance by seeking to deny Europe the status of originating protagonist in his play; yet the very fact of the contestation confirms Europe in the status under contestation. For the specific idiom of address—that is, the modern stage, the printed text, and the perceptible murmurings of Aristotelian tragedy—remains at the very least of European provenance: Europe, not to belabor the point, remains the occasion and irreducible addressee of the playwright’s labor.⁸⁴

⁸³ See Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia” in *The Freud Reader*, 584-589, at 587.

⁸⁴ Olakunle George, “Cultural Criticism in Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*,” 86.

Let us just add to George's argument the point noted earlier: the fact that Soyinka wrote *Horseman* and that it got its first reading in the imperial heart of colonialism at the very time his striving for a uniquely African mode of self-apprehension was being denied the stature of literature to his face at Cambridge University. And, surely, it cannot be deemed a trivial matter nor be taken as just another stereotype that Soyinka points up against a minor colonial agent when in *Horseman* he has the ADC attempt to put the "uppity" Olunde in his place, by saying, "These natives put a suit on and they get high opinions of themselves" (45). Olunde, we recall, makes his entrance "dressed in a sober western suit." In this context, I think it should not be sloughed off as a mere case of idle speculation to note that Soyinka has cultivated a personal sartorial style that is among other things remarkable for its studious avoidance of the western suit, sober or otherwise! Second, the extent to which the traumas visited by the pre-independence ruling class and by the national bourgeoisies of the post-independence states—which themselves are laughable parodies of the modular nation-state imposed by the departing colonial regimes—repeat the traumas of slavery and colonialism, often to more shocking dimensions, and knock the wind out of the sails of the postcolonial writer. In concrete terms, how such atrocities and deprivations as the Crisis in the Congo that claimed Patrice Lumumba; the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-70; the seemingly unending chain of coups and counter-coups; the grotesque phenomena of Mobutu, Field Marshall Idi Amin Dada, Emperor Bokasa, Master-General Sergeant Doe, Generals Ibrahim Bagangida and Sani Abacha; the "revolutionary" wars of

Liberia and Sierra Leone, the ethnic cleansing genocides of Rwanda and Sudan, etc., etc., make a mockery of any claim to even a moral victory in the project of self-apprehension and race retrieval.⁸⁵ As Soyinka so early in his career observed, the “black tin god,” given equal opportunity—which he has certainly been given or seized by any odious means necessary—“would degrade and dehumanize his victim as capably as Vorster or Governor Wallace.” Consequently, if the African writer, whose “innocence” is “daily questioned” by the newspapers’ accounts of one disaster after another, is assigned the onerous task of reconsidering “our relationship to the outer world” and determining “what alone can be salvaged from the recurrent cycle of human stupidity,”⁸⁶ how does he or she deal with the inevitable question of the repressed or the political unconscious? How, indeed, does the writer come to acknowledge her implication in the very

⁸⁵ I am not suggesting that atrocities and deprivations are peculiar to Africa, and that the postcolonial writer or public intellectual automatically loses the moral high-ground for that reason alone. As Walter Benjamin famously noted, every civilization is a document of barbarism, and the postcolonial intellectual can legitimately claim that the West has the far more voluminous document of barbarism in which s/he has been a victim too many times. The point, however, is that the West already occupies the epistemological grounds and through its domination of the means of propaganda continues to set the terms and tone of the debate. For instance, while the Rwanda genocide took place at the same time as the bloodbath in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the dominant mode of presenting the former was that of African barbarism or savagery merely reasserting itself while the ethnic cleansing horror in Europe was always humanized through historical context. The dark continent image of Africa ingrained by a racist imperial ideology produces all kinds of nervous reactions to every new instance of so-called black-on-black violence on the continent which at its worst extreme leads to such anomalies of affect as witnessed by Keith Richburg’s self-loathing in his account of the Rwandan tragedy, *Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1988). The history of unequal global power relations thus puts the burden of always being morally correct on the postcolonial subject.

⁸⁶ Wole Soyinka, “The Writer in a Modern African State” in *Art, Dialogue and Outrage*, 15-20, at 19.

processes she seeks to re-present? How can she bring to consciousness what necessarily is, or must, be repressed?

CHAPTER THREE

EXPERIENCE AS THE BEST TEACHER: TRAUMA, REFERENCE AND REALISM IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

Well over a decade after Joan Scott dismissed experience as an essentializing category too dubious to be relevant to the discourse of identity¹ the scepticism may have shifted to a new terrain. Dominick LaCapra, for instance, is convinced that Scott may have overstated her strict constructivist view of experience, but he views efforts aimed at defending its cognitive salience as compromised by their epistemological focus.² LaCapra posits trauma as the aporetic limit case of experience and although his goal is to theoretically link trauma to ordinary experience, he does so by abandoning the epistemological grounds altogether. LaCapra sees trauma only as a category that betrays the effects of experience but which really escapes the concept (4, 69). Such definitions of trauma and experience propound serious claims and because they go to the core of what predominantly constitutes objective knowledge in the academy today, they merit continued scrutiny. For, both ordinary experience and such extraordinary kinds of experience as historical trauma lie at the heart of claims about social and cultural identity. Moreover, our identities index ethical values, given that *who* we think or know ourselves to be

¹ Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991), 773-97; further reference within the text.

² Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); see especially Chapter One, "Experience and Identity." Subsequent reference to this work within the text.

determines to a large extent, for better or worse, our choices and capacity for moral agency.

Evidently, the category of experience proves rather resistant to all attempts to erase its cognitive salience. Experience, Scott admits in her already cited essay, constitutes an indispensable way of talking about historical events, delineating difference and similarity and “claiming *knowledge* that is ‘*unassailable*’³ (797). Scott confesses further that the quotidian value of experience makes it far “more useful to work with it, to analyze its operations and to redefine its meaning” than the peremptory disavowal that her logic otherwise compels. LaCapra, on his part, denies the cognisable reality of traumatic experience, yet he not only finds it possible to praise a realist interpretation of trauma in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* but has also written persuasively on socially-mediated ways of working-through its effects.⁴ Clearly, what Scott and LaCapra end up proposing is possible only if experience has an inherent cognitive value. For how does one redefine or work-through what one cannot possibly know? It seems more useful to agree with Robert Jay Lifton that “Anything that is psychological experience has to do with meaning.”⁵

I contend in this chapter that trauma is not *beyond* but is merely a more complex form of experience requiring a supple but

³ My emphasis.

⁴ See in particular the concluding chapter of his *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory and Trauma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 205-223, and in general his further reflections on the notions of acting-out and working-through in *History in Transit*.

⁵ See Cathy Caruth, “An Interview with Robert Jay Lifton” in Caruth, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 128-147, at 133.

equally complex theory to elicit its cognitive dimensions. What is lacking and therefore constitutes the shortcoming of the theories of experience and identity propounded by Scott and LaCapra—and even Cathy Caruth whose work I both draw on and critique and who accepts the reality of traumatic experience—is an adequate theory of reference. For reference expresses the relation between language or any symbolic system and significant constitutive features of the world. Consequently, only a cogent theory of reference would make it possible for experience to play the critical role that Scott is willing to concede to it: talking about what happened (history, memory), ascertaining difference and similarity (identity), and establishing knowledge (epistemology). If Scott writes from a Foucauldian framework of power and knowledge, with its attendant precept of radical indeterminacy, LaCapra launches his critique apparently as a realist sympathiser. The idea of experience as a useful category of intellectual enquiry has been of long-standing interest to LaCapra, a historian, and he had been part of an extended debate in the field of intellectual history on the subject involving Joan Scott and John Toews. While reviewing that debate, John Zammito describes LaCapra as being closer to the realist position,⁶ a view that LaCapra himself admits, making his critique

⁶ See Zammito's essay, "Reading 'Experience'" in *Reclaiming Identity*, 279-311. Zammito reviews the following works: Joan Scott's already cited essay, "The Evidence of Experience," a shorter version of which appears as "Experience" in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, eds. Judith Butler and Joan Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 22-40; John Toews, "Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience," *American Historical Review* 92 (1987), 879-907; refers to Dominick LaCapra's "History, Language and Reading: Waiting for Crillion," *American Historical Review* 100 (June 1995), 799-828; *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); *Soundings in Critical Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); and *Rethinking Intellectual History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).

something of a collaborative effort in expounding the dynamics of what he describes in *History in Transit* as “the experiential turn” (3), a phrase that immediately evokes the so-called linguistic turn whose influence is still so pervasive in the academy. I would like, then, to begin by laying out LaCapra’s argument, as I understand it, given that it is central to the perspective I defend in this chapter.

Trauma and Experience: LaCapra’s Caveat to Realists

In *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory*, LaCapra discloses his goal to be that of gaining “greater clarity about the concept of experience, especially in its implications for historical understanding” (2). LaCapra probes the still opaque area where experience intersects with history and social life with a view to identifying “what escapes experience” and yet has “experiential effects” (4). One of the ways he does this is by identifying some slippery modes that cannot be classified as experience, or that are not “encompassed by a certain conception of experience” (23). That certain conception is the post-positivist realist one proposed and developed by several theorists and published under the title, *Reclaiming Identities: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*.⁷ The realist conception

⁷ Edited by Paula M. L. Moya and Michael R. Hames-García (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); see in particular the Introduction by Moya and the essay by Linda Martín Alcoff, “Who is Afraid of Identity Politics?” For further accounts of the post-positivist realist conception of experience and identity, see Satya Mohanty, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), especially Chapter 7 and, in particular the section, “A Realist Approach to Culture and Politics,” 206-216; Mohanty, “Can Our Values Be Objective? On Ethics, Aesthetics, and Progressive Politics,” *New Literary History*, 32 (2001) 803-833; Paula M. L. Moya, *Learning from*

of identity, elaborated in this volume, holds that our experiences have a cognitive value, that with the help of a complex mediating theory they yield objective knowledge about the salient features of the actually lived world. Realists believe that although experience is context-specific, it refers nevertheless in verifiable ways to the social world. And that the ways of determining the objectivity of any epistemological claim based on experience are not different from the processes employed to validate scientific knowledge held to be the model of objectivity. To the realist, all knowledge is partial and subject to review. Consequently, realists do not hanker after an impossible ideal of a mode of knowing absolutely free of bias or error but, instead, celebrate fallibilism as a necessary part of scientific enquiry. The realist admits that identities may indeed be ideological constructs but insists that they are not less real for that reason since her notion of a post-positivist realism disavows a vulgar, essentialist idea of identity that presumes a natural correspondence between experience and the phenomenal world. In the words of the feminist philosopher and scholar, Linda Martín Alcoff, identities are, in this way, no more than “positioned or located lived experiences in which both individuals and groups work to construct meaning in relation to historical experience and historical narratives.” Thus, an individual or group’s identity can be said to represent their “horizon of agency,”⁸ their experience

Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), especially 12-17; Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Alcoff et al, *Identity Politics Reconsidered* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

⁸ Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 42.

constituting in the first instance an “epistemic privilege”⁹ which may be defined as *prima facie* or contingent knowledge claims available to the individual or group as a result of a specific historical experience and social location. For realists, the category of experience includes even emotional experience, since our emotions, Mohanty argues in *Literary Theory* (following Ronald de Souza), are “ways of paying attention to the world” as “they fill the ‘gaps’ between our instinctually driven desires, on the one hand, and our fully developed reasoning faculties, on the other” (210). The potential for growth in knowledge and consciousness represented by this epistemic dimension of experience is what Paula Moya describes as “learning from experience” in her book of the same title and which I extend in the main title of this chapter by reference to the adage, Experience is the best teacher.

Mohanty defines experience as referring “very simply to the variety of ways humans process information” (205), a definition that LaCapra quarrels with and which forms the main prong of his critique in the essay “Experience and Identity” in chapter two of *History in Transit*. LaCapra puts pressure on the realist argument for the cognitive value of experience by positing trauma as the limit case of experience. He is of the view that the realist conception limits experience to humans and that while it may cover “certain forms” of experience, it is not all-embracing; that it is, in short, “too narrow and epistemocentric” (40). To illustrate his argument, he lists eight

⁹ Mohanty gives an explanation of this term with respect to workers and the oppressed in several places in *Literary Theory*, but the reader might find the most precise account in his discussion of the “third” specific advantage of the realist approach to experience and identity at 232-34.

dictionary definitions, and ten categories, of experience that would expose the limitations of the realist perspective. If my reading is correct, then it seems clear that of the ten subversive instances he privileges trauma—including post-traumatic experience—as that which encompasses several of the characteristics or related factors that destabilise the realist conception. Trauma, it is worth noting, has been a major theme of several of LaCapra's writings, enjoying extended treatment in at least two earlier works.¹⁰ A post-positivist orientation, LaCapra maintains, "remains neopositivist if it confines itself to objectification and does not engage the problem of other modes of signification that may complement, be intimately bound up with, and also test objectification as well as place in question the binary opposition between objectivity and subjectivity (or the external and the internal)" (70). As I have already indicated and hope to show below, in seeking to extend the discursive terrain of experience and identity LaCapra may have fallen short of his mark by not only abandoning the epistemological grounds but also seeming to lean towards the very indeterminacy for which he censures Scott. And for that, as well as for the additional reason of an absence of a theory of reference in his impressive body of work on the subject of history and trauma, he fails to see the potential of realism for expanding the category of experience without giving up its cognitive status and its critical import for progressive identity politics. But so much depends on the term that we

¹⁰ See his already cited *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* and *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

must ask, What is trauma? And in what specific ways might it contribute to a realist literary and cultural theory?

Trauma and Literary Theory

The original meaning of trauma is a “wound,” an “injury” to living tissue, but the more specific usage of the term in medical literature has it as injury inflicted not only on the body but on the mind as well. In the glossary of Katherine Jones’s translation of Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*, trauma is defined simply as “injury, bodily or mental.”¹¹ Derek Walcott, who advocates a poetics of amnesia in relation to the historical trauma of slavery—and whose work I examine in the next chapter—keeps both meanings alive in his poem, “Laventille” when he speaks of “a wound, / some open passage that has cleft the brain, / some deep, amnesiac blow.”¹² Walcott merges cause and effect and as it were “closes” the gap that ordinarily separates them. This is in keeping with the nature of a trauma defined as a shattering event “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness,”¹³ thus its constant return by way of flashbacks or repetitive actions in the mind’s attempt to master it. A trauma launches the victim—individual or group—into an unfamiliar situation beyond their imagination. And being unfamiliar,

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage, 1939), 178.

¹² Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems: 1948-1984* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 85-88, at 88.

¹³ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.

there is nothing in the victim's experience or consciousness, in her memory of past occurrences, for mediating and understanding the strange event. The traumatic event shatters every pre-existing frame of reference and makes its integration into consciousness extremely difficult, hence the apparent memory void that characterises it. Standing between the event and the belated consciousness of it is the gap described as the period of "incubation" or "latency" by Freud. It is precisely in this period when the experience is unavailable, wholly or partially, to consciousness that its most dramatic impact on memory occurs and produces the sort of ambivalent behaviour manifested in the "apparent" form of a willed amnesia. In *Moses and Monotheism*, where Freud uses the concept to explain Jewish history, he analogises a traumatic event to the experience of a victim of a catastrophe:

It may happen that someone gets away, apparently unharmed, from the spot where he has suffered a shocking accident, for instance a train collision. In the course of the following weeks, however, he develops a series of grave psychical and motor symptoms, which can be ascribed only to his shock or whatever else happened at the time of the accident. He has developed a "traumatic neurosis." This appears quite incomprehensible and is therefore a novel fact. The time that elapsed between the accident and the first appearance of the symptoms is called the "incubation period"... It is the feature which one might term *latency*.¹⁴

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 84.

This concept of inherent latency informs LaCapra's emphasis on the distinction between the traumatic event and the traumatic experience: the former is punctual and situated in the past; the latter is not punctual and remains elusive to the extent that "it relates to a past that has not passed away," that "intrusively invades the present and may block or obviate possibilities in the future" (55). Latency, then, constitutes a lacuna in the victim's memory, occluding immediate knowledge of the experience of her trauma. It creates a seemingly unsolvable paradox—a "quite incomprehensible" fact, as Freud says—for victim and sympathiser alike. Concrete reference to the insidious operations of this phenomenon might be seen in the gap in self-knowledge exhibited by the two characters in *Beloved*, Sethe and Paul D, whom I discuss below. And, hence, LaCapra's logic: if a traumatic experience is not available to the victim in a way that it can be integrated into her consciousness, then it cannot be experience properly speaking. It is a persuasive argument, seeing that ordinary—or what LaCapra calls "existing"—experience is itself not static or transcendental and bears no self-evident knowledge. But have we reached the limit of our understanding of experience, its multiform and complex modes? Does, in fact, our present understanding of experience, with a little more of the analytical work Scott urges, wholly support the exclusion of trauma from the category of experience? Or does the challenge posed by the extreme case of traumatic experience require us to work outside our usual frameworks of understanding? For, we must remember that as Caruth points out, trauma, though

admittedly opaque, generates nevertheless “a force of knowledge.”¹⁵ Perhaps the more salient point to make about the epistemic question posed by trauma is that it denotes a kind of knowledge that has yet to attain the narrative form which would make it amenable to memory, as Caruth suggests while putting a gloss on Claude Lanzmann’s deliberate strategy of denying the possibility of telling the story of the Jewish holocaust in his film, *Shoah*.¹⁶ Indeed, seen this way, the mystery of trauma can be likened to the opacity that surrounds any hidden knowledge access to which is possible only with a special key or code, the ease of access to such knowledge depending on its complexity and the degree of ignorance surrounding it. It should be noted that in excluding trauma from experience, LaCapra does not distinguish between “types,” or, we should say, degrees of trauma and seems to base his claim on such extreme or aphasic forms as might absolutely defy recall. In which case, more than the traumatic experience would be in issue (for instance, where there is such grievous brain or other bodily injury that biological functioning is seriously impaired). In the typical traumatic instance, Caruth points out, what the phenomenon of latency confronts us with is not so much the period of forgetting after the accident, but, rather, the absence of full consciousness during the accident. This feature of belatedness, first diagnosed by Freud in his treatment of returned World War I combat soldiers, and recognised in the United States among veterans of the Vietnam war, is what the American Psychiatric Association in

¹⁵ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 18.

¹⁶ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 155.

1980 named broadly as post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD.¹⁷ But, obviously, what is delayed or not immediately remembered is open to future recovery, however complicated and prolonged its process might be. Indeed, Caruth insists that the experience of trauma and the fact of latency do not consist “in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known.”¹⁸

But what are the need and relevance of the psychoanalytic concept of trauma to literary and cultural theory? An obvious answer would be that it pertains to the mind and the human actions it determines, which, in turn, is the realm of literature as of other narratives. Secondly, the record of our civilization, ancient and modern, is a rather violent and bloody book of atrocities, most of which have had to be repressed if the human mind were to function in any “normal” way. If we include natural disasters, the list of horrors grows even longer. Consider: inter-tribal, civil, ideological, imperialist/colonialist and world wars; genocide and ethnic cleansing; the use of increasingly sophisticated weapons of mass destruction (the atomic bomb, cluster bombs, nerve gas); the breakdown of family and social mores (rape, incest, child and spousal abuse, violent pop culture of cinema and video); droughts and famine, earthquakes, tsunamis and other natural disasters, etc. All of these constitute to varying degrees shattering events that overwhelm the mind’s sturdiest defences. Their unspeakable reality cannot be accepted into

¹⁷ Prior to this moment, some of the early terms for trauma were combat stress, shell shock, traumatic neurosis and delayed stress syndrome. See Caruth’s succinct but informative Introduction, “Trauma and Experience,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* for an account of the evolution of trauma as a medical concept.

¹⁸ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 17.

consciousness, but though repressed or forgotten returns when triggered by similar events to produce symptoms of compulsive repetition or the acting-out of the originary unintegrated event as the mind battles to master its horror. A theory of trauma helps throw light on this intractable problem of the human condition simultaneously at the personal and social levels. If literary narratives are, among other things, ways of bearing witness to life, then the narratives of survivors are testimonies that bring lived perspectives to the tragedies of traumatic events. But even this calls for caution, for inherent in the capacity to remember is the capacity to distort. Thus, as testimonies to events whose effects and the memory of which range over a period of time, they must be subjected to the most careful evaluation with no guarantee of successful interpretation. The retrospective imperative of the exercise, however, has the benefit of enabling a reflective reconstruction in which truth and error are better articulated for the recovery of agency. It is necessary to stress this point because that opportunity for reflexivity, as James Berger rightly points out, is “both constructivist and empirical” for the simple reason that the process compels close attention to “the representational means” through which an event is remembered while still retaining the importance of the event itself. In other words, trauma never excludes us from its hard reality (what actually happened, “the event itself”), even when we encounter it in a refracted or filtered medium, such as through survivors’ testimonies in a (literary) narrative. A concept of trauma, then, holds immense potential for the study of history and historical narrative, even of narrative in general, “as the verbal representation of

temporality.”¹⁹ The primary text I examine in this chapter, *Beloved*, aptly illustrates this view. Lastly, the above circumscribes the intersection of trauma with literature and literary theory, anthropology, philosophy, history and historiography, and culture, making it perhaps indispensable to the social psychology of an increasingly troubled—not to say traumatised—epoch.

But I should address a second and narrower question: what is the relevance of trauma studies to the post-positivist realist approach to literary theory? Put another way, what is the common ground between trauma studies and realism? And with LaCapra’s critique in mind, in what particular way does a psychoanalytic concept of trauma studies help to recover the realist dimensions of trauma seen as a limit case of experience? Before venturing an answer, I would like to clarify that I am here not concerned with the task of elaborating a definition of trauma, clinical or otherwise—a task I am not qualified for, in any case—but in seeking through such a working definition as I have already proffered a better understanding of the peculiar social psychology of the post-colonial condition. In other words, to examine how trauma unsettles existing definitions and compels us to revisit our understanding of experience as a crucial basis of identity. It is a move partly informed by a realisation on the part of very sensitive readers of *Beloved* that a more satisfactory account of traumatic experience would require insights beyond the specific limits of literary theory. But realism, at least the post-positivist variety that I affirm

¹⁹ James Berger, “Trauma and Literary Theory,” *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 38, no. 3 (Fall 1997), 569-582, at 569-74.

here, in its defence of the meaning-making dynamics of any symbolic system is nothing if not a hermeneutics. I rely on the psychoanalytic concept of trauma, then, as an interpretive theory that mediates the relationship between experience and identity; as, in the words of LaCapra, “a form of critical theory with explicitly evaluative and socio-political dimensions” and not as an “escapist” adventure in the realm of psychotherapy or “an ideologically saturated substitute for philosophy.”²⁰ In his often-cited essay, “The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On *Beloved* and the Postcolonial Condition,” Mohanty anticipates the benefits of such a cross-disciplinary strategy for a realist project of literary analysis and the recuperation of besieged social identities.²¹ Within such a cross-disciplinary framework, Berger arrives at a convergent “realist” reading of *Beloved* with Mohanty, albeit via a differing “post-apocalyptic” framework.²² Given that psychoanalysis has emerged from early doubts and obscurity²³ to become a very influential science of the mind with an

²⁰ Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit*, 2.

²¹ Originally published in *Cultural Critique* 24 (Spring 1993), 41-80, and included in a slightly revised form as “Postcolonial Identity and Moral Epistemology in *Beloved*” in his *Literary Theory and the Claims of History*; see especially 216-229.

²² LaCapra describes their two readings as such (*History in Transit* 43n), but see the section, “Ghosts of Liberalism: *Beloved* and the Moynihan Report” in Berger’s *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*, 188-216.

²³ Perhaps the most cogent charge against Freud is that the “science” he founded isn’t really a science but mere speculation. His most famous critic along this line would be Wittgenstein who in his *Lectures and Conversations in Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief* dismissed psychoanalysis as being basically speculation that didn’t rise to the level of hypothesis. Freud, he claimed, conflated reasons with causes, concluding that psychoanalysis was at best “A powerful mythology.” I have relied on Harold Bloom’s summary of Wittgenstein’s characterisation of psychoanalysis here. See his “Freud: Frontier Concepts, Jewishness, and Interpretation,” in Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 113. Interestingly, a charge from within the camp of psychoanalysis is that Freud was too “scientistic,” too preoccupied with the need to justify his theory on scientific grounds

established place in the humanities curriculum, nods to Freud by critics and scholars lend support to Harold Bloom's observation that Freud was not only a "good materialist"—or empiricist, if we follow Berger—but in fact "too good an observer not to know that we are driven by something beyond material knowledge."²⁴ I contend that this "something beyond material knowledge," when successfully decoded in all of its complexity, tells a "story" of the original event that "refers us, indirectly, to the unexpected reality—the locus of referentiality—of the traumatic story,"²⁵ as Caruth rightly points out but fails to show convincingly, but more on this below.

On this question of the undergirding realism of the psychological, one can do no better perhaps than point out the fundamental premise of psychoanalysis; at least, the classic Freudian

that he often failed to follow the unruly drives he had uncovered to the logical end. For one instance of this view, see "An Interview with Robert Jay Lifton," by Cathy Caruth, in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 128-147, especially at 133 where Lifton says, *inter alia*, that "as Freud struggled painfully to remain a scientist in the terms of his era, in the nineteenth century terms of science, he often neglected the very thing that he had so importantly discovered, the aspect of experience, of psychological experience. He neglected it for theories of origin, which were primarily instinctual." It is a focus, according to Lifton, that could lead to losing "a sense of the flow of experience" itself.

While noting the possible dangers Lifton points out here, especially given his concern with the problematics of a return to origins in the interpretation of experience, I am nonetheless convinced that a focus on origins, when supplanted by other analytical concepts, such as realism, or even Lifton's symbolic structure of image and meaning, can be very useful in efforts to understand such complex experiences as trauma. Finally, I find Bloom quite convincing when he says of Wittgenstein that he paid an "involuntary tribute to Freud's mythologizing power" since "All mythology is interpretation, but interpretation only becomes mythology if it ages productively" and that what counts in the end about psychoanalysis is "its interpretive power" (*ibid.*). To Bloom, Freud's peculiar strength was "to say what could not be said, or at least to attempt to say it, thus refusing to be silent in the face of the unsayable," or as Morrison might have put it, in the face of "unspeakable thoughts, unspoken."

²⁴ Harold Bloom, "Freud: Frontier Concepts, Jewishness, and Interpretation," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 115.

²⁵ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 6.

variant which I draw from here. Freud's theory is rooted in the family, hence the place of its Ur-concept, the oedipal complex. There can hardly be a firmer ground for dealing with reality than that constituted by the family, generally seen as a microcosm, and certainly the crucible, of society as we currently know it. As Peter Gay notes, Freud's "account of the growth of the ego (and, of course, the super-ego) implicitly makes a great deal of room for the impact of the external world—society in its varied manifestations—on the individual." Gay adds that one reason why Freud "wrote little explicit social psychology" is that "he thought individual and social psychology to be virtually the same."²⁶ Indeed, in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud himself makes plain this assumption:

The contrast between individual psychology and social or group psychology, which at a first glance may seem to be full of significance, loses a great deal of its sharpness when it is examined more closely. It is true that individual psychology is concerned with the individual man and explores the paths by which he seeks to find satisfaction for his instinctual impulses; but only rarely and under certain exceptional conditions is individual psychology in a position to disregard the relations of this individual to others. In the individual's mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent; and so from the very first individual psychology,

²⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 626; subsequent reference within the text.

in this extended but entirely justifiable sense of the words, is at the same time social psychology.²⁷

Morrison frames family as her primary narrative prism and the complex way in which the individual narratives of the characters in *Beloved* are intertwined and serve to complete not only each other but also to fashion the collective narrative of an interpretive community of slaves and free negroes against the backdrop of the Fugitive Slave Law testifies to Freud's insight. It should be noted that Freud very quickly goes on to compare the dialectic of individual and group psychology to relations within the family and underlines its primary place as a site of psychoanalytic discourse. He concludes that all such relations are to be considered as social phenomena: "The relations of an individual to his parents and to his brothers and sisters, to the object of his love, and to his physician—in fact all the relations which have hitherto been the chief subject of psycho-analytic research—may be considered as social phenomena" (3-4). Lastly, I should add that the attraction that a good concept of social psychology holds for the realist is its relevance to a wholistic hermeneutic project. However speculative or abstruse psychoanalysis as a science of the mind may be, it is at its best, as Bloom argues, not only "a method of interpretation" but also "itself an interpretation."²⁸ In his argument for the relevance of trauma to literary theory, Berger endorses this view when he says that "trauma

²⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, the Standard Edition, translated and edited by James Strachey, with autobiographical introduction by Peter Gay (New York: W. W. Norton, 1959), 3.

²⁸ Harold Bloom, "Freud: Frontier Concepts, Jewishness, and Interpretation," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 113.

provides a method of interpretation” and that it facilitates the “interpretation of cultural symptoms” manifested in “the growths, wounds, [and] scars on a social body.”²⁹ If a good interpretation is that which broadens our knowledge by referring more accurately to the lived world, that which offers a more cogent understanding of human experience in all its variety—even of such experience as might at the onset be unsayable or unthinkable—then a concept of trauma is one more useful tool of analysis for the theorist.

In what follows, I will attempt to show how trauma’s opacity might be made more intelligible to extend the argument in defence of the epistemological grounds of experience. I will do so by examining from the standpoint of philosophical realism³⁰ the intriguing category of trauma posited as the limit case of experience that threatens, subverts and undoes its cognitive claims. My argument is that although trauma undeniably constitutes a limit case, every trauma nevertheless presents a narrative that refers, albeit indirectly, to its underlying reality. If a narrative is what occurs when we apply intellect to events or observable phenomena, then its underlying reality is the social location in which event or observation and interpretation take place. Every trauma, then, refers us to an interpretive horizon, the site in which we live our experiences and from which “we must engage in the process of meaning-making.”³¹ With the right mediating theory, the hidden meanings of a trauma can be gradually uncovered by

²⁹ James Berger, “Trauma and Literary Theory,” 572-73.

³⁰ See the “Introduction,” footnote 9 above, for a brief explanation of this term which, basically, is the view that scientific knowledge is theory-dependent, contingent, and subject to review and that it is no less objective for that reason.

³¹ Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, 43.

reference to its socially constitutive space. I demonstrate my claim with a realist reading of *Beloved*, a work whose subject is the founding and inherited trauma of slavery. Its narrative tension is sustained in the main by the self-cancelling and self-constituting paradox of memory and forgetting, a poetics of amnesia that is at the same time a compulsion to remember as a precondition for individual and communal healing. I read *Beloved* as highlighting the near-paralysing complexity of traumatic experience up to the point where it might be possible to agree that it is indeed too unstable for any epistemic pursuit or identity politics, but also as eloquently displaying the intricate processes through which knowledge and error are eventually sifted. But the first part of this claim would be true only if one seeks, whether by design or default, an error-free, trans-historical basis of knowledge; what in my view unwittingly makes LaCapra, for instance, to argue that with trauma the realist notion of fallibility presents an inadequate reality check to the epistemological process. Yet, throughout in *Beloved* historical reality serves as the frame and referent of the disempowering trauma that the characters seek to escape but which they can successfully grapple with only by acknowledging it. In short, it becomes obvious that the further Sethe and Paul D sink into the abyss of the unconscious the nearer they come to the socio-historical reality of their trauma. I show through extensive discussions of selected moments and passages the dynamics of trauma and memory and how the narrative does the hard but necessary work of evaluating competing mediating theories until a *more* accurate and liberating one is attained. In this epistemic

struggle, Morrison portrays two characters whose individual narratives underscore the fundamental dialectic of objective or “scientific” inquiry: that all knowledge is partial and subject to review. She presents them as traumatised persons who, starting from the relative advantage of their social location, are constantly revising, supplementing, or refining earlier conceptions of self and community the more they learn about the causal features of their world. I conclude by asserting the cognitive status of traumatic experience.

“But How Will You Know Me?” Trauma, Memory and Meaning

Early in *Beloved*, an intriguing conversation takes place between Sethe and her daughter, Denver. She has just told Denver the story of her (Denver’s) miraculous birth on the bank of the Ohio River where she had nearly died from the exhaustion of her escape from Sweet Home. It is spurred by a statement made by the fugitive Amy Denver—Sethe’s fortuitous midwife and for whom Denver is named—while nursing Sethe’s battered feet that “Anything dead coming back to life hurts.”³² This fine detail is important for the following reason: the phrase “coming back to life” echoes the concepts of “return of the repressed” central to the structure of trauma, and “return to the source,” a major trope of the anti/post-colonial project of reclaiming identities best expatiated by Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral.³³ Amy’s remark makes Denver link an image she “sees” of a white dress holding onto

³² Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage International, 2004), 42; henceforth all reference within the text.

³³ See the Introduction for specific references.

Sethe as she prayed to the baby ghost that haunted 124 Bluestone Road until Paul D's arrival. The ghost, Denver says, "looked just like" Sethe. To Denver's enquiry as to what Sethe had been praying about, this is Sethe's strange response:

I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened." (43)

When Denver tests the claim that the picture of a past event can assume an objective existence "out there" by asking, "Can other people see it?" Sethe does not hesitate to reply very emphatically in the affirmative. To Sethe, so real and ineradicable is the past that anyone can even apprehend it by "bumping into a rememory that belongs to somebody else." But if we go beyond her rather esoteric rendition, what we discern is her conviction about the unshakable hold of an undying past, an emphatic way of delineating a collective history and the inter-generational transmission of traumatic experience. Walter Benn Michaels has a similar reading of this passage: "because what once happened is still happening, because ... slavery needn't be part of

your memory in order to be remembered by you.”³⁴ Sethe then goes on to connect the abstract return of the trauma (what will “happen again”) to the concrete site of the already happened event: “Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It’s never going away. Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what’s more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you.” Sethe is so sure of this “fact” that she warns Denver never to go there: “So, Denver, you can’t never go there. Never. Because even though it’s all over—over and done with—it’s going to always be there waiting for you.” All of this leads Denver to conclude that “nothing ever dies,” to which Sethe readily concurs: “Nothing ever does.”³⁵

If so, why, then, is Sethe resolved to keep the past at bay, to define for herself the somewhat religious task of daily “beating back the past”? Why, in another context, does Morrison speak of this desire in the real, non-fictional, world of lived experiences? In a tone of personal and collective indictment, she says that *Beloved* is about “something that the characters don’t want to remember, I don’t want to remember, black people don’t want to remember, white people don’t want to remember,”³⁶ showing that the past of slavery is taboo alike to

³⁴ Walter Benn Michaels, “‘You Who Never Was There’: Slavery and the New Historicism—Deconstruction and the Holocaust,” in *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, ed. Hilene Flanzbaum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 181-97, at 185.

³⁵ Preceding quotations from 43-44.

³⁶ See Toni Morrison, “The Pain of Being Black,” *Time*, 22 May 1989, as quoted in Henderson, “Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text,” 83.

slaves and to slave-owners and their descendants. As Mae Henderson points out, however, such a will to forget, paradoxically encapsulated in the novel's closing injunction that the haunting story of *Beloved* was not one "to pass on," (324) cannot be taken literally as that would "contradict the motive and sense of the entire novel."³⁷ Which explains why Morrison is equally intent on proving Sethe wrong by expressing her resolve to insulate Denver from the past in language that guarantees the futility of the endeavour: "As for Denver, the job Sethe had of keeping her from *the past that was still waiting for her* was all that mattered" (51).³⁸ If the past is never *past* but simultaneously a pending event as well, it must be so for Denver as for Sethe. And it is precisely the inexorable imbrication of past, present and future that Sethe has just tried to explain to Denver. Moreover, this past, following Denver, has taken on Sethe's image: "Like you. It looked just like you" (43). What Denver suggests is that the very history that Sethe seeks to banish has come to assert such an intimate claim that it has become, for all intents and purposes, her doppelgänger, and so totally inescapable.

This, then, leads to the question of what is really at play in the narrative: a wilful or a determined amnesia? In other words, is there something here far more surreptitious and subversive of agency than the story reveals on the surface? The issue this question raises becomes even more poignant given that a poetics of wilful amnesia

³⁷ Mae G. Henderson, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text," in *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text*, ed. Hortense J. Spillers (New York: Routledge, 1991), 83.

³⁸ My emphasis.

constitutes a recurrent motif in the literature of memory and identity in the New World, perhaps the most radical proponent of which is the Caribbean poet and playwright, Walcott (already mentioned above), who urges the descendants of slaves to “sear their memory with a torch.”³⁹ The view I propose in answer to this question is that the amnesiac tendency is more determined than willed and that this is a dimension of the psycho-affective condition of the (post)colonial experience, and I attempt to show below why this is the case. This helps to explain, I will argue, the active oxymoronic functioning of remembering and forgetting—or to use Morrison’s own quaint neologisms, “rememory” and “disremembering.” To put it another way, why the characters are relentlessly and remorselessly beaten back and forth between the hard pillar of forgetting and the burning post of remembering in a manner that acts-out and so compulsively repeats the trauma of the very experiences they wish so much to escape. The interesting point here, however, is that it is in the very desire to flee from history that the slave manages to breach the iron curtain of the master’s identity-negating narrative and to reclaim individual and collective agency. Thus, by the curious road of denying the very historical memory that should define her identity, the slave even more unforgettably remembers it and so recovers her being. This is a fundamental contradiction, a perplexing irony, that I believe can only be adequately explained through close attention to the nature of what Morrison herself describes as “unspeakable thoughts, unspoken” (235)

³⁹ Derek Walcott, “The Muse of History” in *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 5.

and Caruth as “the unthinkable realities to which traumatic experience bears witness.”⁴⁰ It is, indeed, “a special psychological situation.”⁴¹ As Caruth notes, the central enigma Freud reveals is the fact of the victim’s lack of full consciousness during the accident, since he walks away apparently unharmed. The historical power of this complex psychological situation, Caruth stresses, is “not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all.”⁴² Morrison evokes these elements of a traumatic experience, especially the founding trauma inherited by Sethe and intensified by her own slave experiences; events that repeat the original trauma and drive her towards infanticide and the central conflict of the plot. The founding trauma is the original act of violent capture in Africa, aggravated by the horrors of the middle passage, which Morrison foregrounds in the preface. If that event marked the separation of Sethe’s mother from family and familiar surroundings, Sethe herself would experience a similar forceful separation at Sweet Home plantation. As she tells the story of this childhood trauma within the larger trauma of slavery itself, and, remarkably, in answer to Beloved’s simple question whether or not her mother did not fix up her hair, Sethe never really knew her mother. She is pointed out to her by Nan, the crippled old woman who watched over the little children while their parents worked the fields. Nor did she know her father but had to content herself with the mere thought that one of the men who “danced the antelope ...

⁴⁰ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ix.

⁴¹ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 84.

⁴² Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 17.

certainly was her own" (37). She rarely saw her mother before she was lynched and "hung" from a tree, and the brutal facts of this early childhood are summed up in Sethe's answer to Beloved: "She never fixed my hair nor nothing. She didn't even sleep in the same cabin most nights I remember." These details assume a special significance in the light of the place of family in the trauma of slavery, and we gain a better understanding of the dialectical process of (traumatic) experience and identity in the only episode of Sethe and her mother in the novel. As Sethe tells Beloved, the only thing that her mother did do was show her the distinctive mark by which she could know her as her mother; that is, she identifies herself to her daughter through the somatic mark of her trauma:

One thing she did do. She picked me up and carried me behind the smokehouse. Back there she opened up her dress front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, "This is your ma'am. This," and she pointed. "I am the only one got this mark now. The rest is dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark." (72)

Sethe's mother's wound marks her individual identity; indeed, she *is* the wound: she points to the mark and says, "This is your ma'am. This." As the only one left among her generation of slaves who had the closest links to an ancestral heritage or knowledge fast fading from the memory of the New World slave—in short those who spoke a language "which would never come back" (74)—her identity is as unique as her

experience. But the moment would probably be best remembered by Sethe's plea that she be branded so her mother would recognise her if anything happened to her as well. When she asks, "How will you *know* me?" and begs, "Mark me, too ... Mark the mark on me too," she evokes one of the three uses of experience that Scott concedes—establishing difference and similarity.

Sethe's thoughts after telling this story return the reader to the paradox of remembering and forgetting wrought by her trauma. She had just remembered, the narrator informs us, "something she had forgotten she knew." But had she indeed forgotten this rather unforgettable moment? There are two possible grounds for speculating that she hadn't, but had rather walked away from the moment apparently unharmed. First, the innocence of her tender age that makes it impossible for her to be fully seized of the origin and nature of her mother's wound; and, second, the words that the narrator uses to describe Sethe's pain of recollection: that something privately shameful "had seeped into a slit in her mind behind the slap on the face and the circled cross" (72-73). The phrase, "a slit in her mind" conveys immediately the idea of a violent cleaving of the brain by the "amnesiac blow" described by Walcott, the precise detail of the place from where the shame of the wounding seeps into Sethe's mind serving to link both bodily and mental injury. As Freud points out in *The Ego and the Id*, consciousness is the "surface of the mental apparatus ... ascribed ... as a function to a system which is spatially the first to be reached from the external world" of perception.⁴³ A

⁴³ Sigmund Freud, *The Freud Reader*, 632.

traumatic experience, therefore, is precisely that which is so forceful, so shattering, that it breaches this very mental surface and enters directly into the unconscious; that is, it enters the mind unmediated. Sethe's forgetfulness, then, seems more of a psychic defence against a horrific event for which she was intellectually unprepared; an event that bypassed the ego, the site of "reason and commonsense" (636). Trauma, as Caruth, following Battaille, explains, instances a "confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge—that cannot ... become a matter of 'intelligence'—and thus continually returns ... at a later time."⁴⁴ The process by which the mind shuts out slave experiences, according to Freud, would be seen as "regulated by the pleasure principle," whose ultimate aim is "an avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure."⁴⁵ It proceeds from the ego's instinct of self-preservation, but Freud makes an important observation relevant to my point: those who suffer from the effects of a trauma are "more concerned with *not* thinking of it" (598).⁴⁶ In other words, it is not so much that their trauma is *beyond* their experience—for they have indeed *experienced* it—but that it is an experience they would rather not remember, though remember it they must. For, trauma's constitutive paradox lies precisely in the fact that only by forgetting it does it acquire the force that compels its return, its acting-out, and so the possibility of working it through and integrating it into consciousness.

⁴⁴ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 153.

⁴⁵ Sigmund Freud, *The Freud Reader*, 594-95.

⁴⁶ Original emphasis.

This explains the irony of Sethe repeating her trauma the more she tries to forget it. The first act of repetition, infanticide,⁴⁷ stands as the main conflict of the novel. The second is Sethe's rape at Sweet Home which fulfils her wish to be given the bodily mark of her trauma. Of all the indignities of slavery, one of the two that scar Sethe above all others and harden her resolve to escape is her rape by Schoolteacher's nephews.⁴⁸ For complaining to her bedridden mistress, Schoolteacher had her whipped even while she was pregnant. The whipping deadens the tissue and leaves a gruesome scar on her back. Although Sethe successfully flees Sweet Home—that is, walks away from the scene apparently unharmed—it is clear she is yet to come to terms with the experience a full eighteen years after while narrating her ordeal to Paul D. For, the force of a trauma has to do not only with the severity or barbarity of the event itself—that is, the physical wounding of the body—but also, and more important, the brutal scarring of the psyche. This is why Sethe later describes the dishonour resulting from the savaging of her dignity as “far worse” than the putatively inhuman act of drawing a saw across her own infant daughter's throat and watching her blood pump into her hands as she tries to absorb her death spasms by squeezing her (295). Thus, to every other physical

⁴⁷ The old woman, Nan, tells Sethe the story of how she and her mother were together from the sea, how they were severally raped by the crew, and how Sethe's mother threw away all the issues of her rape except Sethe whom she had with a black man. (*Beloved* 74)

⁴⁸ The other event occurs when Schoolteacher teaches a lesson in phrenology to one of his pupils “doing” Sethe by instructing him to “line up” her “human characteristics” on the left side of his notebook and “the animal ones” on the right (228). This forms a central justification for her infanticide because “no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper” (296).

measure of the inhumanity of Schoolteacher's action, Sethe can think only of the dishonour of her violation and repeat merely the reply, "And they took my milk"; the second time with as much a note of outrage as of a censure to Paul D who seems to be focussed only on the bodily wounding:

"They used cowhide on you?"

"And they took my milk."

"They beat you and you was pregnant?"

"And they took my milk!" (20)

This compulsive repetition, itself a mode of acting-out and so unwilling remembering of a repressed experience, indicates the continuing struggle by Sethe's mind to come to terms with and master a shattering event it was unprepared for. Indeed, long before her conversation with Denver, Sethe anticipates this compulsion when Denver queries the irony of a seeming nostalgia for, and a tortured escape from, a place named Sweet Home when she admits the involuntary nature of her memories: "But it's where we were. ... All together. Comes back whether we want it to or not" (60).

It is necessary at this point to briefly address the question of the unspeakability of the traumatic story of *Beloved*, as Morrison asserts, vis-à-vis its burden of historical reality. While Morrison enacts this narrative binary by further complicating the plot with a ghost story, she simultaneously invites a realist reading by basing the novel's principal character on an actual historical figure—that of the fugitive

slave, Margaret Garner (xvii). The problems of reading and interpretation that this move creates are exemplified by Ann Snitow who first damned the novel in her review, but later identified its enigmatic subject as “the trauma of slavery.”⁴⁹ It is by now a consensus that the ghost embodies the past⁵⁰ and figures a lived experience, which, in its race-specific particularities, “provides the mechanism for, as well as the meaning of, the conversion of history into memory.”⁵¹ The process of conversion of history into memory, into conscious knowledge, is perhaps best illustrated by Paul D who, like Sethe, is similarly intent on forgetting the past. And this is significant for two reasons. Firstly, in his personal search for meaning and agency, Paul D’s reflections on the determining social world of his identity as a slave chart the difficult evaluative process of attaining objective knowledge. In his wrestling with the crisis of identity resulting from his trauma, he best epitomises the distinguishing human faculty of reflexivity and the substitution of insight or objective knowledge for mystification or error. Secondly, and as testimony to this fact, Sethe’s ability to finally “lay it all down” by acknowledging her past so she might begin the task of working through her own trauma is linked to Paul D’s arrival at 124 Bluestone Road, a factor that points to the inherited and collective nature of their slave

⁴⁹ See Ann Snitow, “Death Duties: Toni Morrison Looks Back in Sorrow,” originally in *The Village Voice Literary Supplement*, September 1987, reprinted in *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, 26-32.

⁵⁰ Mae G. Henderson, “Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text,” in *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text*, 83.

⁵¹ Walter Benn Michaels’s “You Who Never Was There”: Slavery and the New Historicism—Deconstruction and the Holocaust,” in *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, 186-87.

experiences. Indeed, Sethe anticipates the emotional solidarity, the “[t]rust and rememory,” that he inspires early on in the novel when she admits that Paul D adds something to her life that she had been too afraid to count on and that her own story was bearable “because it was his as well” (116). As the reader notes at the end of the novel, Paul D returns to Sethe at the precise moment when she is already lying in Baby Suggs’s death-bed to await her own “rest.” But that is only after Paul D had learned the true meaning of his slave identity by coming to terms with its shameful history. His involuntary copulations with Beloved, the embodiment of this history, inaugurates both the inward and outward interpretive moves that would unfold the “wonderful lie” of his ascribed manhood by relating his trauma to the real nature of the world around him. Sweet Home plantation owner, Mr Garner, practised a kind of benevolent slavery that complicated the trauma suffered by Paul D and his fellow male slaves by inhibiting accurate self-knowledge on their part. Garner saw and treated his male slaves as men, and boasted this to his fellow farmers. At the cost of fights and bruises, he revelled in being tough and smart enough “to make and call his own niggers men” (12-13). Even then, we are reminded that Baby Suggs is worried by Garner’s order to his man-bred slaves never to leave Sweet Home except in his company (166), a worry confirmed when, after Garner’s death, Schoolteacher arrives to end the pretence, and—after a disastrous escape attempt—finally set Paul D on the complex task of working-through his trauma. Paul D belatedly contemplates the true meaning of manhood in slavery; his lengthy self-interrogation is worth quoting in full:

Now, plagued by the contents of his tobacco tin, he wondered how much difference there really was between before schoolteacher and after. Garner called and announced them men—but only on Sweet Home, and by his leave. Was he naming what he saw or creating what he did not? That was the wonder of Sixo, and even Halle; it was always clear to Paul D that those two were men whether Garner said so or not. It troubled him that, concerning his own manhood, he could not satisfy himself on that point. Oh, he did manly things, but was that Garner's gift or his own will? What would he have been anyway—before Sweet Home—without Garner? In Sixo's country, or his mother's? Or, God help him, on the boat? Did a whiteman saying it make it so? Suppose Garner woke up one morning and changed his mind? Took the word away. Would they have run then? And if he didn't, would the Pauls have stayed there all their lives? Why did the brothers need the one whole night to decide? To discuss whether they would join Sixo and Halle. Because they had been isolated in a wonderful lie, dismissing Halle's and Baby Suggs' life before Sweet Home as bad luck. Ignorant of or amused by Sixo's dark stories. Protected and convinced they were special ... being so in love with the look of the world, putting up with anything and everything, just to stay alive ... (260)

In terms of its direct interrogation of slavery as the absolute negation of subjectivity, of its Hegelian depiction of the slave's attainment of consciousness and agency in the death struggle with the master, this passage is arguably the most important in *Beloved*. Yet, a cursory

reading might suggest that what Paul D confronts in this self-scrutiny is ordinary, and not traumatic, experience. In order to show how this passage helps to make my claim about the referential reality of traumatic experience clearer, it needs to be unpacked. And there is no better place to start than the opening sentence which makes reference to the tobacco-tin whose “contents” are the subject of Paul D’s reflections. The tobacco tin, we remember, is the sealed receptacle of his slave memories. It is where Paul D has “packed away” troubling “doubt, regret and every single unasked question,” a self-defence measure he resorts to as a way of willing himself into being (261). The tobacco tin, “lodged” remarkably enough “in his chest”—in his most secret place—stands as the emblem of his repressed trauma. By the time he got to 124 Bluestone Road—that is, by the time of his compulsive rendezvous with history—he believed nothing in the world could pry it open (133). The more important thing to note in this passage, however, is the fact that Paul D can unravel the wonderful lie of his interpellated identity as man-slave or slave-man only by referring his experiences at Sweet Home to—*testing* them against—the objective or external features of the world he knows. This world is not limited to the plantation governed by the juridical economy of slavery but extends also to that of his African ancestors, as he demonstrates in the questions about what his true identity would have been before Sweet Home, without Garner’s power of naming, in Sixo’s country or his own unmentioned (and perhaps unknown) mother’s.

If a first step in working-through trauma is to acknowledge it, then it becomes even more significant that the “rusted shut” tobacco

tin flies open the very moment Paul D is compelled by what the narrator describes as a “brainless urge to stay alive” to call by name and then couple with—in other words, confront and grapple with—his traumatic history. Beloved’s account of her arrival at 124 Bluestone Road establishes her as the undeniable claim of the past on the present, a reading underscored by her sections of the monologues of possession and merger where she emerges as the literal “bridge” that spans the troubled present and the misty past symbolised by the water out of which she claims to have climbed onto land (88-89). As has been noted, her monologues “reconnect” not only to those ancestors who perished in the Middle Passage but, also, “specifically with Sethe’s mother who had come from Africa.”⁵² The mere acknowledgement of his trauma, the narrative suggests, proves enough to reveal a red heart—his *non-slave* human heart—to Paul D in place of the substituted tobacco tin. And it offers him the contrast to see that far from being a man, his worth in dignity was less than a rooster’s (86); that he was after all just an owned thing, property with a set dollar value (267). In his quest for meaning, therefore, Paul D’s examination of his trauma yields him a more accurate self-knowledge which replaces the erroneous self-conception arising from the shame and self-doubt that tells him he is a “trespasser[s] among the human race” (147). He comes to this moment by first learning to value his ancestral origins, the original hermeneutical space that defines his pre-slave identity and from which he can meaningfully engage the trauma of his new world. As he confesses, Beloved, “escorted” him to

⁵² Satya Mohanty, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History*, 224.

some “ocean-deep place he once belonged to” (311) and reminded him of something he was “supposed to remember” (276).

And if, as Sethe says before the critical moment defining the ethical conflict at the heart of the novel, she needs Paul D to recover the past she has put at bay in order to work-through her trauma, then it is clear he can play that role only if he has himself come to terms with that very past which happens to be his as well. The temporal logic of the novel seems to stress this point by putting Paul D’s reflections near the end of the plot. As a result of her trauma, Sethe, like Paul D has come to the point, according to Robert Jay Lifton, of a “radically altered”⁵³ sense of self. The worst thing slavery did to you, Sethe says, was not “just work, kill or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up (295).” Consequently, she does not believe she has any self worthy of her care separate from her children, her “best thing” (296). Till the very end of the novel, Sethe does not reverse this low self-esteem, and in her defence, it can be said that nothing in her lived experience compels a differing sense of self. And because she remains firmly in the grip of this false consciousness of self, she is even more vulnerable to the crippling power of her trauma. Hence, Sethe’s attempted murder of Mr Bodwin, friend and benefactor of the black community and owner of House No. 124 itself where she finds refuge in Cincinnati, but whose appearance triggers memories of Schoolteacher and his posse coming to return her children to slavery.

⁵³ Cathy Caruth, “Interview with Robert Jay Lifton” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 137.

But although Morrison does not portray Sethe as coming to such self-knowledge as would enable her to rethink her radically altered sense of self—to claim ownership of herself, as Sethe memorably puts it⁵⁴—the novel ends on a note that suggests she is well on her way to that moment; that she is about to find a new meaning in life. The first sign of this possibility is Sethe’s tacit acceptance of Paul D’s return. It has to be noted that the long first part of the novel which covers well over half of its entire length ends on a cold note of finality to their parting caused by Paul D’s unsympathetic condemnation of Sethe for her act of “thick” love. As Paul D makes his exit, Sethe, with back turned to him,⁵⁵ murmurs the ominous words, “So long.” But armed with a

⁵⁴ Sethe’s thoughts on her first twenty-eight days of “unslaved life” in which she notes the difference between being free and claiming ownership of the freed self are presented as follows:

“Sethe has had twenty-eight days—the travel of one whole moon—of unslaved life. From the pure clear stream of spit that the little girl dribbled into her face to her oily blood was twenty-eight days. Days of healing, ease and real-talk. Days of company: knowing the names of forty, fifty other Negroes, their views, habits; where they had been and what done; of feeling their fun and sorrow along with her own, which made it better. One taught her the alphabet; another a stitch. All taught her how it felt to wake up at dawn and *decide* what to do with the day. That’s how she got through the waiting for Halle. Bit by bit, at 124 and in the Clearing, along with the others, she had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another.” See Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, 111-12 (original emphasis).

⁵⁵ And here, I think, it is worth noting the symbolism of this gesture given that it was indeed Paul D’s spontaneous empathy shown first by his shock at its sight and then by his loving caress of Sethe’s frightfully scarred back that fanned the dead embers of trust in her heart. Morrison gives a moving account of this moment, set appropriately in perhaps Sethe’s most romantic moment with a man (I don’t think we can name any other, not even with Halle, to rival it) on pages 21-22, from which I excerpt the following:

“She [Sethe] opened the oven door and slid the pan of biscuits in. As she raised up from the heat she felt Paul D behind her and his hands under her breasts. She straightened up and knew, but could not feel, that his cheek was pressing into the branches of her chokecherry tree.

Not even trying, he had become the kind of man who could walk into a house and make the women cry. Because with him, in his presence, they could. ...

better and more accurate understanding of the trauma of slavery, Paul D returns to Sethe a changed man. He acknowledges the error of his previous judgement, likening Sethe to a beast for allowing herself to be pushed to infanticide. "You got two feet, Sethe, not four," he had pronounced. His condemnation of Sethe for killing her daughter rather than let her be returned to slavery had lacked empathy, any sense of fellow-feeling for the peculiar way in which Sethe as a woman experienced the trauma of slavery differently from him as a man. Paul D's apathy not only thwarts the trust and solidarity he had inspired in Sethe, but also puts paid to his own ambition of taking root and starting a new life with her in the relative freedom of Cincinnati (261).

But in more senses than one, Paul D's return to Sethe is also a return to a repressed and unexplored realm of his nature: empathy. It is precisely that quality that Paul D exhibits on the first day of his arrival at 124 and which achieves the magical effect of making Sethe want to trust and remember things again. Two instances mark this repressed trait to which Paul D now returns. First, he overlooks Denver's apparent resentment that the Sweet Home man who finds his way to them is not the father she pines for and instead defends her against Sethe's quick and stern chastisement (16). Second, and more important, Paul D, at the very beginning of their reunion, admits his

Would there be a little space, she wondered, a little time, some way to hold off eventfulness, to push busyness into the corners of the room and just stand there a minute or two, naked from shoulder blade to waist, relieved of the weight of her breasts, smelling the stolen milk again and the pleasure of baking bread? Maybe this one time she could stop dead still in the middle of a cooking meal—not even leave the stove—and feel the hurt her back ought to. Trust things and remember things because the last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank?"

ignorance of the peculiarity of a woman's experience of slavery which must necessarily be different from either a man's or the general experience of slavery in significant ways. Implicitly, he also concedes the epistemic privilege that motherhood confers by confessing that "Men don't know nothing much" when Sethe begins to talk about her rape, the taking of her milk which nobody else could get to her baby fast enough or appropriately (19). And now when Sethe asks him if he has returned to count her feet, Paul D says only that he has come to rub them (321). Given that Sethe has at this point all but given up the ghost, Paul D's response recalls another moment of rescue from imminent death: when the fugitive Amy Denver *rubs* Sethe's "dead" feet back to life and saves her on the bank of the Ohio River. These two moments, one evoking the other, as so much else does in this gripping narrative of inter-subjectivities, gestures towards the healing on the horizon. Thus, the beginning of Paul D's recovered consciousness and healing sets the stage for the kind of shared meaning and fellow feeling that would empower Sethe to begin the process of carefully reversing her negative sense of self. She is her own best thing, Paul D tells her. Although this seems incomprehensible to Sethe at first—she responds with a puzzled "Me? Me?"—the powerful ending scene nevertheless gives purchase to Paul D's optimism for the future when leaning over to take her hand and touch her face, he declares: "me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (322). Inspired by Paul D's uncovering of the referential reality and epistemological basis of their shared trauma, Morrison presents Sethe

on the verge of recovering her human identity defined by will and moral agency.

Reference as Epistemic Access: Trauma's Horizon of Meaning

We have seen the intriguing play of memory and forgetting in trauma return Sethe and Paul D, even at the most fraught moment, to a better interpretation of their experiences and an empowering self-knowledge. This seems an appropriate juncture for a discussion of reference as the conceptual category that facilitates the move from the one moment of self-apprehension to the other. For, it will be recalled, the absence of an adequate concept of reference in the work of the theorists I mentioned early on is, as I claim, a major lapse that prevents their useful insights from achieving their full explanatory potential. It is a lapse, I argue, that can be remedied by a realist conception of identity, given its privileging of reference as an inherently epistemological concept. Moreover, it is this lack, as I also show, that leads LaCapra to the contradiction earlier observed: asserting that the post-positivist realist conception of experience is too “epistemocentric” while at the same time praising a realist reading of trauma in *Beloved*; doing so in opposition to readings which see the novel as an instance of misguided identity or memory politics. LaCapra applauds Mohanty for “elaborat[ing]” a reading that sees the novel instead “as a significant, critical staging of the relation of a community to its past in terms of a shared traumatic memory.”⁵⁶ But what explains this relation, and how

⁵⁶ Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit*, 43.

can a literary or cultural theory achieve LaCpra's avowed goal of "gain[ing] greater clarity about the concept of experience, especially in its implications for historical understanding?" (2). The absence of such an explanatory nexus is what Berger, reviewing *Representing the Holocaust* with specific regard to the intersection of history and literature, sees as "a loss" in that LaCapra "has not examined the relations between historical trauma and any literary text."⁵⁷ Berger did not name it reference but I read him with the premise in mind that it is only in the way that human experience, linguistically expressed or otherwise, refers to the lived world that meaning is made—a reading, in any case, not far from Berger's acceptance of narrative as "the representational means" through which a traumatic event may be remembered and yet retain its empirical essence. As Richard Boyd argues, literary-historical terms give us "epistemic access" to the object of their terms only in their referentiality, what he describes with regard to metaphor as the "accommodation of language"—and we might add, any signifying practice—to the "causal structure of the world."⁵⁸ For Boyd, and for my purposes here, reference is "fundamentally an epistemological notion" and the main task of a theory of reference is to "explain the role of language in the acquisition, assessment, improvement, and communication of knowledge"; in particular, its role in facilitating "social co-operation and rational deliberation." Boyd sees this knowledge gathering process

⁵⁷ James Berger, "Trauma and Literary Theory," 577.

⁵⁸ See Richard Boyd, "Metaphor and Theory Change: What is 'Metaphor' a Metaphor For?" in *Metaphor and Thought*, 2nd ed, Andrew Ortony, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), especially 481-552.

as irreducibly social, as constituting the “essential core” and “basis” of a theory of reference. One of Boyd’s illustrations of the sociality of this process is the manner sparrows successfully warn each other about the presence of predators in their midst.⁵⁹ Epistemic access, then, entails the gathering of information about relevant explanatory features of the world. Being a social undertaking, we can engage in it only from specific locations, as social beings able to exercise reasoning and judgement with our background theories, our foreknowledge, as the starting point. Reference becomes in this view the condition of our existence as historical beings whose thoughts and actions have meaning or purpose only in the context of lived experience. Seen this way, epistemic access is the same thing as what Mohanty, extending Boyd, calls “epistemic privilege”⁶⁰ and Alcoff, drawing extensively from the hermeneutic tradition, affirms as the “horizon of agency” or an “interpretive horizon.”⁶¹ What is common to these terms is the view that knowledge is socially embedded and that identities contain contingent meanings or interpretations of the world available to the individual or group as a result of shared location and experience.

An insufficient appreciation of this aspect of experience and its role in meaning-making constitutes a serious lacuna in the effort by Caruth to attempt a theory of reference. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth discloses the need to specify the “link between narrative and reality” as the subject of her essay on reference and de Man. But although Caruth is quite mindful of the role of reference in giving

⁵⁹ This explanation will be found in 500-503.

⁶⁰ Satya Mohanty, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History*, 232-34.

⁶¹ Linda Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, 42, 94.

access to history, she fails nevertheless to elaborate a convincing theory. It is worth pointing out, however, that this failure is partly due to an implicit and perhaps driving desire to defend Paul de Man from charges of anti-semitism in his World War II journalistic writings. Caruth justifies her choice of de Man with a focus on “The Resistance to Theory” on the ground that it addresses “the resistances, or objections, to theory made in the name of referential reality, or of an external world” (74). In that essay, it was de Man’s mission, Caruth tells us, to disavow the claim that “language cannot refer adequately to the world” nor “truly refer to anything at all, leaving literature and language, and even consciousness in general, cut off from historical reality.” What de Man opposed, she adds, is the idea of linguistically oriented theories “modelling the principles of reference on those of natural law.” He wished, rather, to demonstrate “a way ... of precisely keeping history from being swallowed up by the power of abstraction.” It is, then, against a naïve natural correspondence theory of reference that de Man offers the idea of a resistance “from ‘within’ theory” by associating it with “falling,” with “the resistance one feels upon ... the impact ... [of] falling down” (73-74). Caruth adopts this task of debunking simplistic correspondence theories of language and reference, but just as with de Man, without an intent to formulate a sophisticated and coherent alternative. It explains, I think, why she never contemplates a different framework that does not assume an unmediated link between sign and object, experience and reality. In the result, she is unable to pursue in the right direction her insight regarding the surprising force of knowledge constituted by trauma’s

historicity (22); a force, she rightly observes, generated by the opacity resulting from trauma's inherent latency.

Yet Caruth remains very close to the social hermeneutics of Boyd's epistemic access and what LaCapra alludes to when she notes that the belated experience of trauma inscribes a communal history that transcends the individual victim or one generation (71), and that "the story of trauma is inescapably bound to a referential return." Caruth even goes so far as to speak of the "interpretation of reference through trauma" to account for its belated impact (17). Unfortunately, Caruth's commitment to the de Manian view of reference leads her to an uncritical acceptance of the rather abstruse—she calls it paradoxical—idea of theory as a "fall." Distancing herself from any coherent notion of referential reality, Caruth asserts that reference emerges not in its accessibility to perception but in the resistance of language to perceptual analogies. Here is the full concluding passage:

"[R]eference emerges not in its accessibility to perception, but in the resistance of language to perceptual analogies; that the impact of reference is felt, not in the search for an external referent, but in the necessity, and failure, of theory. This theoretical knowledge, however, cannot be separated from the particular performance of de Man's own text, which always accompanies its theoretical lesson with a story. It is the originality and unique referential resonance of de Man's writing, I would suggest, to discover the resistance of theory in the story it tells of its own falling. What theory does, de Man tells us repeatedly, is fall; and in falling, it refers. To capture the reality of this falling is the crucial task de Man's theoretical work is

engaged in, and it is the task that falls upon us as we read the very particular story of de Man's writing." (90)

The self-referential tenor of the argument apart, it is clear that Caruth, as de Man, speaks only of one kind of semiotic theory—the naive correspondence sort—but casts it as *all* theory which once it fails constitutes an absolute fall and thereby debunks external referentiality. Obviously, the basis of this argument lies outside of theory itself, as two critics point out. In his analyses of three key responses to de Man's World War II writings—including Jacques Derrida's no less, but not Caruth's essay⁶²—LaCapra concludes that they fall within the "justifiable motivation" of countering condemnations of de Man's early journalism as if it "proves that deconstruction is politically dubious."⁶³ James Berger who in his review of *Unclaimed Experience* responds directly to Caruth's essay shares this view. Berger considers the de Man chapter as "problematic," as merely an apology for de Man through a defence of figurative language "as the only properly referential language." The chapter, he adds, valorises de Manian methods as the only valid mode of interpretation. Caruth's notion of theory or reference as falling, Berger charges, simply "blurs at the end into an implied apology for de

⁶² For this reason, I should stress that this is an interpretive move, *a priori*, on my part, and I dare it for the simple reason of Caruth's investment in the deconstructive project and her ebullient defence of de Man. It is unclear to me, however, why LaCapra fails to make any mention of Caruth whose essay, as originally published in the *Yale Journal of Criticism* (October 1990), precedes LaCapra's own original publication of his essay in *History and Memory* (vol. 4, 1992) by two years.

⁶³ Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*, 135.

Man's wartime writings."⁶⁴ Indeed, Caruth ends up conflating the two terms: theory and reference.

If neither de Man nor his explicator succeeds in formulating a theory of reference that would keep history from abstraction, it is easy to agree with the view that the best way to read de Man on reference is to see him as merely "criticizing a foundationalist epistemology."⁶⁵ For, clearly, de Man was still seeking the elusive linguistic access to history as late as the retrospective essay, "The Return to Philology."⁶⁶ The key to that access can be found in another kind of return—call it a return to the human—envisioned by M. H. Abrams in "The Transformation of English Studies: 1930-1995"⁶⁷ and is fashioned by the social communication theory of language, elucidated by such realist philosophers of semiotics as Charles Sanders Peirce, Hilary Putnam, Mikhail Bakhtin, and the already cited Richard Boyd, among others.⁶⁸ Abrams's essay, like de Man's, is a retrospective look at the field of English and literary studies and provides a good perspective for highlighting the major failing of de Man's theory of language. "I am confident," Abrams says, "that after all the current challenges and alternatives, the primary site of literary criticism and studies will again

⁶⁴ James Berger, "Trauma and Literary Theory," 578-79.

⁶⁵ Satya P. Mohanty, "The Dynamics of Literary Reference: Narrative Discourse and Social Ideology in Two 19th Century Indian Novels" in *Thematology: Literary Studies in India*, ed. Sibaji Bandyopadhyay (Kolkata [Calcutta]: Jadavpur University, 2004), 230-248, at 231. See also his *Literary Theory*, 32.

⁶⁶ Paul de Man, "The Return to Philology," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Vincent B. Leitch, editor (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 1527-31.

⁶⁷ M. H. Abrams, "The Transformation of English Studies: 1930-1995," *Daedalus*, 126: 1 (Winter 1997), 105-131.

⁶⁸ For a detailed discussion of this theory from the standpoint of post-positivist realism, see the chapters, "Paul de Man, Language, and the Politics of Meaning" and "Reference and the Social Basis of Language" in Mohanty's *Literary Theory*, 25-72.

be, as it has been for twenty-five hundred years, the human world; that is, a world of purposive human beings communicating with each other in an environing reality.” A return to such a world, says Abrams, “is an indispensable precondition to account for the historical development of a common language, as well as for the way each individual in turn learns to understand and to use that language ... the indispensable presupposition of all linguistic interchanges in the conduct of everyday life.” Abrams contrasts the social use of language to the driving impulses of contemporary literary theory which shift “intellectual vantage” from “the humanistic frame of reference” to a “nonhuman site,” one defined by “the play of language as such.” In the result, “the human agents who produce and interpret a literary work, as well as the world that the work is said (directly or in a qualified way) to refer to or represent, are all translated into the products, effects, or constructs of language or discourse ... [and] ... the functions of human agency are transferred to the immanent dynamics of the signifying system.”⁶⁹

No scholar writing after the “linguistic turn” more unequivocally valorises such a signifying autonomy of language than de Man who figures it as inhering in “the structure of language prior to the meaning it produces.”⁷⁰ It is the dominant current of de Man’s writing on the subject and in many ways offers several useful insights along the deconstructive vein. The problem arises, however, when de Man

⁶⁹ See M. H. Abrams, “The Transformation of English Studies: 1930-1995,” *Daedalus*, vol. 126, no. 1 (Winter 1997), 105-131.

⁷⁰ Paul de Man, “The Return to Philology,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 1530.

goes on to assert that it is a “highly questionable ontological presupposition” to claim that “language, poetic or otherwise, can *say* any experience.”⁷¹ This is a never re-examined premise that leads de Man to create an exceptional figural status for literary language and to exaggerate that status beyond any useful caution against the aleatory dynamics of a symbolic system. Even at the cusp of the linguistic turn in the academy, it was fairly axiomatic—as the work of Peirce (whom de Man selectively cites),⁷² Bakhtin, Putnam, shows—that all forms of language, all signifying practices, even those constituted by inert signals (such as traffic signals), are as a rule socially mediated. But for de Man, literary language is “the only form of language free from the fallacy of unmediated expression.”⁷³ The characteristic essence of literature, or fiction, he says, is “its divergence, as a sign, from a meaning that depends for its existence on the constitutive activity of this sign” (ibid), a specificity that “resides in the possibility of misreading and misrepresentation” (280). De Man’s point here is that misreadings or misrepresentations are not functions of erroneous interpretation—a hermeneutical, and, so, human problem—but of the very nature of figural language. In short, one comes away from reading essay after essay that figural language for de Man becomes a god that gives birth to itself, hence its absolute self-referentiality: “the structure

⁷¹ Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 232.

⁷² See the chapter, “Paul de Man, Language, and the Politics of Meaning,” especially the section, “Reference and the ‘Autonomy’ of Language” in Mohanty’s *Literary Theory*, 42-46, for a discussion of the limited use de Man makes of Peirce. It is worth pointing out also that in the section on the underlying epistemological thesis of de Man’s radical deconstructive theory of language, Mohanty also points out a similar narrow reading of Nietzsche (39-42).

⁷³ Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 17.

of language [is] prior to the meaning it produces”; “all language is about language,” the conceptual power of language “consists first of all of a wild, spontaneous metaphor,”⁷⁴ etc. This hermetically sealed, but infinitely protean (because figural), world of language authorises an indefinite number of meanings or readings, with none proffering a more or less accurate reference to the external world. I will take as exemplary of de Man’s theory of reference his commentary on William Empson’s analysis of the first type of ambiguity.⁷⁵ De Man argues, with respect to Shakespeare’s “Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang” that the “‘meaning’ of the metaphor is that it does not ‘mean’ in any definite manner,” rather, it leads to “an infinity of valid readings.”⁷⁶ Empson lists a dozen possible experiences the line can support and de Man sees “many others,” leading him to conclude that far from “setting up an adequation between two experiences” the metaphor does the very “opposite.” And this grounds for de Man the impossibility of reference and, so, of the absolute indeterminacy of literary language. It is not only that literary language leads to a plurality of meanings, but that they are not distinct meanings, and what is more, they are mutually exclusive. In other words, since the text cannot mean one thing without meaning another/others which is/are contradictory, there can be no meaning; *the text cannot say any experience*. If this is *always* the case, then certainly we can only end up with the very abstraction of history that de Man ostensibly opposes.

⁷⁴ Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 153.

⁷⁵ See William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1966), contents page.

⁷⁶ Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 236.

Perhaps it is an incipient awareness of this untenable result that compelled his late call for a return to philology—the discipline that studies cultures through the historical analyses of their languages—and thus a return to the social origin and productivity of language for access to history and its varied, complex experiences.

Conclusion: Specifying Morrison's Locus of Referentiality

As I hope to have more than indicated, Morrison intended a more or less clear historical referent for her narrative, notwithstanding the complication of the plot with a “ghost story.” She does so, however, not to imply that language—a wrought and delicately handled thing in her hands—can ever be a mirror of nature that guarantees a one-to-one correspondence between sign and object. And she is indeed careful to point to the unsayable-in-language dimension of the story she tells through her narrative strategy and the caveat carefully placed (and repeated for emphasis) at the very end: “It was not a story to pass on” and “This was not a story to pass on” (324). Yet, if Morrison acknowledges the inherent ambiguity of language, she tries nonetheless to be explicit about the referential reality, the epistemic valence, of her narrative by foregrounding it in the psychic life of the slave family as lived within the “house/home antagonism.”⁷⁷ But here is Morrison's image in *Beloved* of what she calls the “racial house” occupied by the slave/ex-slave:

⁷⁷ Toni Morrison, “Home,” in *The House that Race Built*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 5.

a real house, not a cabin. One with an address, one where former slaves lived on their own. There would be no lobby into this house, and there would be no “introduction” into it or into the novel. I wanted the reader to be kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the book’s population—just as the characters were snatched from one place to another, from any place to any other, without preparation or defense.”⁷⁸

The “shared experiences” of the novel’s characters are referred to their historical cause, the original traumatic event. The victims were kidnapped, snatched and thrown into an alien environment “without preparation or defense.” As has been noted, the debates that raged in the eighties about the “dysfunctional,” “pathological” black family, up to the (in)famous Moynihan Report, formed a specific context for Morrison’s narrative.⁷⁹ Authorial intentions aside, we see Sethe, in the passage discussed early on, also express a firm sense of the link between traumatic experience and the historical site—“where I was before”— of its occurrence. Similarly, Paul D establishes a connection between the experiences that drive him to the brink of total disintegration and the Middle Passage, a consciousness of which spells the beginning of his healing. But, perhaps, it is Baby Suggs who makes clearer the relationship between trauma and its referential

⁷⁸ Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, xviii.

⁷⁹ See the section, ““Ghosts of Liberalism: *Beloved* and the Moynihan Report” in Berger’s *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*, 188-216, and Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*, 203-06.

reality with particular regard to the shattering impact the former had under slavery on the black family. The invasion of her house, which prompts Sethe's defiant act of infanticide, shatters Baby Suggs's body and mind, and in her response to Stamp Paid's fervent plea that she return to her exhortatory sermons, she betrays an understanding of her trauma linked directly to the unrelenting violation of her person, this time by way of trespass on her property even after she has been manumitted. To each and every argument Stamp Paid makes to convince her, Baby Suggs responds merely, "They came in my yard," echoing Sethe's earlier response in a different but related setting to Paul D:

"You saying the whitefolks won? That what you saying?"

"I'm saying they came in my yard."

"You saying nothing counts?"

"I'm saying they came in my yard." ...

"You saying God give up? Nothing left for us but pour out our own blood?"

"I'm saying they came in my yard." (211)

"They," of course, stands for Schoolteacher and the legal code that empowered his tragic "trespass"—the external reality of slavery—thus creating the outside/inside dichotomy that must be referred to each other in the effort to uncover the meaning of a traumatic experience. But what meaning, what knowledge, any careful analysis of a trauma yields need not be "unassailable"—another word for foundational—as Scott curiously suggests. Indeed, it is the positivist hankering after

unassailable knowledge, bound to be frustrated by the sheer structure of scientific knowledge,⁸⁰ that leads to denials of the cognitive dimensions of experience and reference. Yet, in the complexity of their reflections on their experiences and the gradual eradication of erroneous reasoning for more accurate views that reflect the constitutive features of their world, Morrison's portrayal of Sethe and Paul shows us that trauma is not beyond, but only a form of, experience—albeit, a kind that is resistant to schematisation. Through their layered exploration of the original and subsidiary causes of their trauma, its effects, and the viable modes of working it through, Morrison helps us to see a way of talking about experience as a cognitive category without denying that the identities it enables are social constructs.

⁸⁰ I am, of course, echoing the title of Thomas S. Kuhn's well-known work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

CHAPTER FOUR

“TILL THE WOUND AND THE WORD FIT”: HEALING THE POSTCOLONIAL BODY-POLITIC IN DEREK WALCOTT’S *OMEROS*

A Free-Floating Wound? Hybridity, Social Complexity and Identity

Six years before *Omeros* Derek Walcott had written in *Midsummer* of his quest for a transformative healing of the Caribbean’s wound of history in the following words: “Who next should pull his sword free of its mesh / of weeds and hammer at the shield / of language till the wound and the word fit?”¹ The emphasis here would appear to be aesthetic; healing possible only through linguistic agency, by “purifying the language of the tribe” as he put it—echoing T. S. Eliot—in the essay, “What the Twilight Says.”² But in the forty-first canto of *Midsummer*, Walcott gives indication of a search that transcends the merely linguistic by linking it to the larger struggle to “appease the past.” Although it is not the first time that Walcott would deploy the trope of the Caribbean’s wound of history—we have already noted the much earlier 1965 poem, “Laventille,” in the preceding chapter where he likens it to a trauma—there is here a conscious effort to historicise the metaphor and trace the path to healing: that of reconciliation with ancestral origins. Addressing his fictional victim, Walcott says, “You

¹ Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems 1948-1984* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1986), 490; further reference within the text.

² Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 8.

were distressed by your habitat, you shall not find peace / till you and your origins reconcile; your jaw must droop / and your knuckles scrape the ground of your native place.” The wound, the word or language adequate to its pain, a hurtful past with which there must be a reconciliation, which in turn is possible only by reconciliation with the ex-slave’s ancestral homeland— all of which form the plot of the “deep hymn of the Caribbean”³ he would later write.

To delineate more clearly the wound: it is the open sore of the transatlantic slave trade and its trans-generational post-traumatic syndrome manifested in what later became colonial possessions and the nominally free nation-states that succeeded the colonies at independence. It is also the wound of genocide against the native Indian populations of the West Indies. For Walcott, the wound symbolises a horror of the past that every denizen of the New World lives with, “whether his ancestor was torturer or victim,” leaving him or her “in the depth of conscience, silently screaming for pardon or revenge.”⁴ In *Omeros*, it is the wound literally and symbolically caused by “a rusted anchor”⁵ and festering in Philoctete’s leg; it is also the psychic head-wound of Major Plunkett (27). Walcott, however, portrays the gash on Philoctete’s shin as the representative wound of Caribbean history and on this point we need go no further than note that Plunkett’s wound is artificial. The swelling in Philoctete’s shin, we are told, “came from the chained ankles / of his grandfathers,”

³ Derek Walcott, *Omeros*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990), 321.

⁴ Walcott, “The Muse of History,” in *What the Twilight Says*, 39; subsequent reference to this volume of essays by page number where the context permits within the text.

⁵ Derek Walcott, *Omeros*, 4.

which was why early on, before the reconciliation with origins, it defied Ma Kilman's ministrations and seemed to lack a cure. Walcott casts Philoctete as a martyr, saying of him that "the cross he carried was not only the anchor's / but that of his race" (19). Plunkett's wound, on the other hand, had to be "stitched" into his character"; he had to be intentionally wounded, "affliction [being] one of the themes of this work" (28). We are introduced to the narrative through the Ur-trope of the wound when Philoctete shows off his scarred shin to tourists; although, it should be noted, Walcott is very quick to place his affliction in the context of the other manifestations of the Caribbean trauma. In particular, the necessary wounding of the ancient trees—metonymically, the gods of the autochthonous Caribs and Arawaks—that, as fishermen, Philoctete and his mates are condemned to inflict in order to build the canoes of their trade, and the psychic wounds of the transplanted Plunketts. But the point is that every major character in—indeed, every Antillean addressee of—*Omeros* is wounded, and this is what gives purchase to Ma Kilman's declaration at the end, "We shall all heal" (319). Walcott traces their suffering to a common tie to the Caribbean. On this score, it is significant that Walcott casts Plunkett as a nominal representative of the rump of Empire who has renounced his white privileges and cross-identified with the Caribbean to the extent of claiming indigeneity rights equal to anyone's—much like his distant forebear, Crusoe. Thus, with a wounded veteran's bravery and rage, Plunkett stands his ground against Hector to stake a non-negotiable claim to the land: "I haven't spent / damned near twenty years on this godforsaken rock / to be

cursed like a tourist,” he heatedly declares when heckled as a white “honky” (256). Plunkett’s claim is not to be taken lightly as the ecumenical vision Walcott elaborates in *Omeros* has a long genealogy. In “What the Twilight Says,” an essay in which he seeks to construct an Antillean identity founded on the full range of the islands’ experiences, Walcott asserts that the Caribbean cannot be claimed exclusively by any one of the races that now populate it: neither the descendants of African slaves, nor of Asian indentured workers, nor of the White plantation owners. To him, the legitimate claim to a pre-eminent suffering and identity put forward by Africans is not an “inheritance but a bequest, like that of other races, a bill for the condition of our arrival as slaves.” Walcott adds, “We have no more proprietorship as a race than have the indentured workers from Asia except the claim is wholly made. By all the races as one race.”⁶ Walcott finds a fellow traveller from the Francophone side of the Caribbean in Edouard Glissant whose pluralist “poetics of relation” proffers the view that following the extermination of the Caribs and Arawaks, the original possessors of the land, Antillean soil could no longer “belong as a rooted absolute either to descendants of deported Africans or to the *békés* or to the Hindus or to the mulattoes.”⁷ Lastly, Walcott’s trope evokes the physical wound suffered by the land as it was forcibly taken from its original owners and made to suffer the ignominy of plantation economy: “every cove” of the island, he asserts, is “a wound” (249).

⁶ Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says*, 10.

⁷ Edouard Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation*, trans. T. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 146-7.

Walcott thus evinces a clear sense of location and the unique social determinants of the wound borne by its inhabitants; what, in a nutshell, constitutes the horizon of meaning of his metaphor. Short of a direct invocation of the word, one would think that there can hardly be a more vigorous but complex assertion of Caribbean “identity” than in Walcott’s work, particularly in *Omeros*. To be sure, he has been vociferous, ferocious even, in denouncing a certain kind of identity politics in West Indian⁸ writing, but no careful reader would mistake the object of his acerbic criticism, itself a reaction in kind to being “jumped on ... for pretentiousness and for playing white”⁹; to wit, the perceived soft aesthetic—as opposed to “the truly tough aesthetic” that he advocates—of his traducers, which in his view is an essentialism that thrives on “the glamour of simplifications” (8) in “servitude to the muse of history” (37). The key word here is “servitude,” a helpless bondage that seemingly justifies a wallowing in self-pity, recrimination and paralysing desire for revenge rather than a transcending of

⁸ Needles to say, I use the terms the Caribbean, the Antilles and the Islands interchangeably but only descriptively in order to avoid the inevitable monotony of staying with one.

⁹ Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says*, 8-9. It should be pointed out, however, that Walcott made himself vulnerable to this charge. He had not only willed himself, at the very beginning of his career, to “suffer / In accurate iambics” (“Prelude,” *Collected Poems*, 3) but had at every turn also taken what might be described as inordinate delight in his colonial education whose “grounding was rigid—Latin, Greek, and the essential masterpieces” (“Meanings,” *Critical Perspectives* 50) and in seeing himself as legitimately prolonging “the mighty line of Marlowe and Milton” when describing his early ambition (see “The Art of Poetry,” interview with Edward Hirsch, *Critical Perspectives* 71)—though not without the usual self-cancelling contradiction that is *de rigueur* with him. On the last point, see for instance the essay “Leaving School,” where he speaks of his early struggles to discover who he was and in the process “discovering the art of bitterness” as well as that he was “a knot of paradoxes: hating the Church and loving her rituals, learning to hate England as I worshipped her language ... a Methodist-lecher, a near Catholic-ascetic, loving the island, and wishing [I] could get the hell out of it.” (*Critical Perspectives*, 31-32).

despair. No doubt, *Omeros* marks a growth and refinement of Walcott's sensibility from the polemical note of internecine literary quarrels and the paralysing conundrum of "A Far Cry from Africa" where he is so "divided to the vein" he cannot "choose" between Africa and the English tongue, even when aware that he cannot "turn from Africa and live."¹⁰ Apparently, for Walcott it wasn't so much a question of choosing sides—which presupposes self-evident truths—but a question of how to engage the bitterness of the history of slavery and colonialism that justified an essentialist identity politics. As a defence of his poetic vision, then, it is difficult to disagree too forcefully with the view that a literature produced in servitude to history "yellows into polemic or evaporates in pathos" while that sired by a putative tougher aesthetic, not driven to explain or forgive history but embracing social contradictions, is more likely to achieve the teleological goal of healing. In other words—and to adapt the Caribbean novelist and critic, Wilson Harris—that it is unlikely to produce an original or authentic gesture of freedom, but more on this below. Walcott's self-styled mulatto aesthetic, scornful of simplifications even for good reasons, refuses to accord history the distinction of "a creative or culpable force" the better not to fall prey to its [history's] "shame and awe," and, ultimately, to cause the postcolonial poet to "think of language as enslavement and ... in a rage for identity, respect only incoherence or nostalgia."¹¹ Admittedly, this is stating the case from Walcott's perspective, and although the narrow point I am making here does not

¹⁰ Derek Walcott, "A Far Cry from Africa," *Collected Poems 1948-1984*, 18.

¹¹ Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says*, 37.

require a more extended and even-handed discussion without the risk of being drawn too far afield, one can do worse than point to Patricia Ismond's critical evaluation of Walcott's poetics alongside the other prominent Caribbean poet, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, with whom he is often compared (for the most part, wrongly, in my view). While noting the highly "positive and timely contribution" of Brathwaite's radical Afrocentric aesthetics, Ismond nevertheless concludes that "in the final analysis" Walcott's form of assertive "protest" is a stronger mode of consciousness.¹²

But to read most of the recent exegeses on Walcott's work, even those that have focussed deservedly on *Omeros*, is to come away with the sense of a determined effort to make a postmodernist writer with

¹² See Patricia Ismond, "Walcott versus Brathwaite" in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, ed. Robert D. Hamner (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1993), 220-236, at 236. I must be quick to point out, however, that I agree with the view that the comparison is a needless one, based as it is on a stark reductionism that does a great discursive injustice to both poets. The critic, John Thieme, has advanced two reasons why this is the case: the investment of both poets in highlighting the emergence of a creole or composite Caribbean culture and their common Western influences. Of particular note in Thieme's argument regarding the latter is the influence of T. S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" in Brathwaite's celebrated trilogy, *The Arrivants*. Obviously, viewing Walcott as Eurocentric and Brathwaite as Afrocentric only tells a "half-truth." See John Thieme, *Derek Walcott* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 3-4. I would like to point to one more instance of their substantive resemblance. It seems to me that Walcott's portrayal of Ma Kilman, the obeah woman who occupies the critical nexus of reconciliation with Africa (the native place, the past) and, so, healing, echoes Brathwaite's "Negus" in the concluding trilogy of *The Arrivants*. The speaker of the poem, possibly a vodoun priestess, having listed what is not enough or adequate to a New World subjectivity, insists: "I / must be given words to refashion futures / like a healer's hand" and adds, "fill me with words / and I will blind your God." As, it can be said, Ma Kilman, after learning the language of her grandmothers, the African babble she had earlier derided, learns to say the words—the names of the African gods—and so blinds the Catholic God (to whom she had been praying) before the secret curative herb is revealed to her (see below for my discussion of healing in *Omeros*). See Edward Brathwaite, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 224. And, arguably, Walcott makes a vicarious return to Africa through Achille (and, to some extent, Ma Kilman), the same journey that Brathwaite had made in person much earlier.

no ascertainable filial loyalties out of him. And, consequently, to ascribe to him a highly attenuated, if not indeterminate, poetics of place that can concede him only a hybrid, cosmopolitan, or transnational identity. Walcott's powerful engagement with the traumatic history of the Caribbean is held then to lack historical specificity on the ground that the experiential uniqueness of his wound metaphor is "energetically" deconstructed by the utter rhetorical force of resemblance and difference. Thus, although the main theme of this chapter is healing, it is worth pausing for a while to clear the path to that goal by examining this tendency, for identity—to parody Walcott himself—is a major theme of this dissertation. The social referents of the wound to be healed ought, then, to be established. In other words, if Philoctete's representative wound is not to be deemed a free-floating, non-referential mark on a random victim's body, then its specificity—what in the previous chapter we called the "locus of referentiality"—must be ascertained. Implicit to the quest for healing are the questions: who is/are to be healed, and where and how was the wound sustained in the first place? As Tejumola Olaniyan, in a critical examination of the poetics of Walcott's theatre asserts, "there is no such thing as hybridity qua hybridity ... unanchored to a particular source."¹³ In the course of establishing the social referents of the wound, I will propose a framework for reading Walcott's apparently confounding identity politics against the readings that portray him as a hybrid postcolonial subversive of identity. After

¹³ See Tejumola Olaniyan, *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 114.

that, and as prelude to a detailed discussion of healing, I will briefly outline the psychoanalytic concepts of acting-out and working-through that I will be drawing from as essential components of any strategy for dealing with the historical trauma metaphorised as “the wound” by Walcott.

The anti-identitarian evaluations of Walcott I refer to above tend to fix upon the self-reflexive and highly allusive dynamics of the other powerful trope of his work—that of travel and discovery, or what John Thieme calls “a *poetics* of migration”¹⁴—to the detriment of the even more pervasive and strongly enunciated moments anchored to what Paul Breslin has described as a “powerful homing instinct.” Breslin is careful to note, though, that this homing instinct often comes into “poignant conflict” with Walcott’s “continuing awareness of his status as traveler even in his own country.”¹⁵ Proponents of views that schematically fit into this category seem to be driven to their conclusions by “a propensity to read Postmodernly,”¹⁶ as Rei Terada aptly put it. Yet Terada’s 1992 study, *Derek Walcott’s Poetry: American Mimicry*, in which she made the above observation, is, ironically, an illustration of this trend. Terada acknowledges that Walcott does not

¹⁴ John Thieme, *Derek Walcott*, 4; original emphasis.

¹⁵ Paul Breslin, *Nobody’s Nation: Reading Derek Walcott* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 233. Breslin makes this observation with respect to *The Arkansas Testament* which contains the poem, “The Light of the World,” that Rei Terada analyses to ground her appraisal of Walcott as a postmodernist but which Breslin gives a contrary reading in partial rebuttal of that claim. I say “partial” because as I have merely obliquely indicated but will show below, Breslin stops short of naming his own doubts, his propensity to privilege open-endedness even in *Omeros* on the question of Walcott’s identity politics, postmodern.

¹⁶ See Rei Terada, *Derek Walcott’s Poetry: American Mimicry* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 226; subsequent reference within the text where the context permits.

perfectly fit the mould of postmodernism into which “a vast majority” of the criticism concerned with his poetry seeks to press him. In fact, Terada further describes critics of this stripe as “straining to reconcile the subversive postcolonial with the relatively conventional versifier” (213). Nevertheless, Terada devotes an epilogue to further strengthen this claim for no stronger reason than Walcott’s alleged obsession “as a late twentieth-century postcolonial” with “cultural and linguistic displacement,” a concern she can only softly say is “sometimes held to be a hallmark of Postmodern literature” (ibid). If this is the condition for entry into the club of literary postmodernism, then virtually all postcolonial writers, it might be said, would be card-carrying members, given the necessarily destabilising relationship they must have with the imperial languages they are constrained to adopt as their medium of expression,¹⁷ to say nothing of the inevitably Janus-

¹⁷ That the postcolonial writer is unavoidably saddled with a relationship of “cultural and linguistic displacement” with respect to the imperial language and culture and that she must therefore subvert the colonial language in order to make room for “a new English” that will bear the burden of her experience is demonstrated by the following well-known formulation of the issue by Chinua Achebe—a writer not even Terada would accuse of linguistic postmodernism—in which, for good measure, he cites another “postcolonial” writer, James Baldwin:

The real question is not whether Africans *could* write in English but whether they ought to. Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else’s? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given this language and I intend to use it. I hope, though, that there always will be men, like the late Chief Fagunwa, who will choose to write in their mother tongue and insure that our ethnic literature will flourish alongside with the national ones. For those of us who opt for English, there is much work ahead and much excitement.

Writing in the London *Observer* recently, James Baldwin said:

My quarrel with the English language has been that the language reflected none of my experience. But now I began to see the matter another way. Perhaps the language was not my own because I had never attempted to use it, had only learned to imitate it. If this were

faced and cross-cultural nature of postcolonial society. All doubts apart, however, Terada portrays Walcott as a postmodernist with an admittedly forceful reading of the poem, “The Light of the World” from *The Arkansas Testament*. Terada likens Walcott to Paul de Man in his “turns of thought regarding figuration” (214) and over the next twelve pages strains—it is difficult to avoid the word—to show how Walcott’s multi-layered deployment of image and metaphor, in short the play of language in the poem, proves his postmodernism. But if the premise of Terada’s reading is the de Manian location of “the poetic by means of figuration” in “opposition to nonpoetic language,” a matter in which rhetoric and figurality are equated “with literature itself” (215), then what are we to make of her admission towards the end—encouraged by her unconvincing comparison of Walcott with Bob Marley—that *all language* is after all figural? “In the end,” Terada says, “the poem suggests that the ‘poetic’ language of metaphor cannot be held apart from Bob Marley’s language, from the old woman’s [of the poem’s] language, from all language” (223). We are not in brighter light either when, concluding by way of a return to the problematic of a precise definition of postmodernism, Terada ends with a statement that goes so far as to make the striking observation already referenced above:

the case, then it might be made to bear the burden of my experience if I could find the stamina to challenge it, and me, to such a test.

I recognize, of course, that Baldwin’s problem is not exactly mine, but I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings. See Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (New York: Doubleday, 1975). I should point out that the quotation from Baldwin is incorporated in Achebe’s statement.

that postmodernism is best defined “not as a set of attitudes or a grammar of rhetoric, but as inseparable from the propensity to read Postmodernly” (226). But this very propensity, one might say, is precisely what defines her reading of the poem, propelled as it is by an impulse towards linguistic indeterminacy making it possible for her to conclude that the poem’s rhetorical force puts Walcott “in the realm of undecidability.” Citing Derrida with particular reference to what she sees as the double metaphorisation of the poem as a “thing,” Terada argues that since the title of the poem comprises a proper name,

we cannot, as when Derrida writes of Ponge, “know with any peaceful certainty whether [it] designates the name of the thing.” The reader cannot stand between these two interpretations to choose one. Neither can we decide whether “The Light of the World” actively produces and undoes these contradictions or whether these contradictions actively produce and undo it, for the process of disclosing the ubiquity of rhetoric also begins in self-knowledge and moves towards generalization, following the route of the universalizing impulse it queries. (square brackets original)

Thus, although Terada, once again speaking provisionally, goes on to say that if Walcott is at all postmodern, his postmodernity “trails behind it Modernism’s tendency to universalize” (225) she appears nonetheless more clearly inclined towards a postmodernly reading for the aporetic than towards that which might privilege a particular meaning. For her, there can be no choice between competing

readings; no interpretation which might be more convincing because it refers more (or less) accurately to the environing world of the poem. We can take as an instance of this claim the differing interpretations by Terada and Breslin of Walcott's misunderstanding of the Marley lyrics he chose as epigraph for the poem—"Kaya now, got to have Kaya now. ... / For the rain is falling." For "kaya," as both critics note, Walcott mistakenly substitutes "Zion-ah" in an earlier version of the poem. For Terada, this substitution of Zion for marijuana (kaya) "magnifies the apocalyptic character of transport" for the poor St Lucian passengers of the city transport, singing and rocking to Marley playing on its stereo. In consequence, Walcott, Terada maintains, does more than delineate "concurrent desires" and goes even further to ask "whether metaphorical transport, in its ecstasy, either leaves its supposed subject behind to unecstatic life and death, or carries them to oblivion by sweeping them up with it" (219). Either of Terada's binary oppositions here possesses equal valence and so cancels the other out, which is why she leaves the matter there. To the contrary, Breslin in *Nation or Nobody* sees in Walcott's substituted word for kaya corroboration of his suspicion that "despite its decentering gestures, this poem harbours a longing for an earthly and transcendent center, a 'Zion'" (239). As he points out, the lyrics of the song were printed on the 1978 album by Marley and the Wailers entitled *Kaya*. Thus, while it is possible that Walcott may indeed not have been "an avid Marley listener," it is also possible that the "longing" Breslin senses may have led him to shape his replacement word as Zion-ah—which, for good measure, rhymes with "kaya now."

What Terada does not entertain, due to her investment in reading postmodernly, is the possibility that there might be more than mere rhetorical play at issue here and that a related, if not different, aesthetic could be what Olaniyan, following Allan Weis, calls “coherent deformation” for an “enabling Caribbean cultural identity.” Seen this way, rhetoric is both a subversive and a reconstitutive force, providing a way beyond a merely deconstructive and disabling aporia. “Coherent deformation,” Olaniyan explains, “is subversive in its undermining the stability of signs, the destruction of the established order of meaning and classification, and the suggestion of the possibility of a realignment of forces.”¹⁸ It is important to note that Terada seizes a telling moment obviously susceptible to a different interpretation to clinch her argument—the moment when the poet-persona of the poem, presumably Walcott, moves from being a distant observer and commentator on the progress of the transport as it picks up and drops passengers to a more neighbourly attitude. The closing scene is quite telling. On disembarking, Walcott drops a pack of cigarettes. One of the passengers calls him by his name from inside the transport by the window and Walcott walks towards him as he holds out the pack. This is a pivotal moment for Terada because Walcott, who in the locutionary stance of the poem describes himself as a “transient,” then cries tears of rejection since there was nothing, it seemed, they wanted from him nor that he could give them.”¹⁹ Terada concludes that “the poet [Walcott] and his counterpart, representing his community,

¹⁸ Tejumola Olaniyan, *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance*, 114.

¹⁹ Derek Walcott, *The Arkansas Testament* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1987), 51; further reference within the text.

exchange virtually ‘nothing’” (223) and that nothing is everything in the figurative economy of the poem. But to so aver requires that Terada make nothing of the fact that the poet [Walcott] does indeed have something he can give and which the man, as well as the community, might want, for the maudlin line ends more optimistically: “nothing I could give them / but this thing I have called ‘The Light of the World’.” That they would want his poem is within the ambit of Terada’s reading, since she admits that the man’s gesture of alerting the poet to his dropped cigarettes “embodies” neighbourliness, consideration, and polite partings, attributes of his society “that have moved the poet to write about it.” Indeed, that Walcott “gives that society what he loves most, his lux mundi, beauty, poetry,” but not to concede too much, Terada insists that this prized gift amounts to nothing and is “even a repetition of abandonment” (224). Yet, there is no evidence that the man or the community that rocks to Marley, whose language is as figurative as theirs (by Terada’s own admission), thought or would think nothing of Walcott’s gift of poetry. If anything, it can only be presumed that they would indeed value it, for how else would the man have known the poet/Walcott by name? If the propensity to read postmodernly is suspended for a moment, then we see that the poet, as Terada correctly notes, “aims for communal relevance, beauty and truth” (225), values at odds with the postmodern project, but completely at home with rhetoric, if we understand rhetoricity to be the inherent characteristic of all language. Furthermore, the driving emotion of the poem is a melange of the laceration of guilt arising from class difference on Walcott’s part

(he can simply catch the plane and leave for a better life anytime), helplessness (changing the material conditions of his poor fellow citizens is beyond his power), and pity for their lot (sheer empathy or fellow feeling, an indispensable quality for a poet)—which Terada also sees, though she chooses to emphasise what she calls “mutual abandonment” and Walcott’s alleged “jealousy” of Marley, “an apter and stronger competitor” (222). Walcott alludes to the emotional centre of the poem, what Breslin sees as a Platonism, in the following response to Edward Hirsch’s question whether or not he still felt “the old tugs between home and abroad” and is worth quoting in extenso:

I’ve never felt that I belong anywhere else but in St. Lucia. The geographical and spiritual fixity is there. However, there’s a reality here as well. This afternoon I asked myself if I would stay here for the rest of my life if I had the chance of leaving. The answer really is, I suppose, no. I don’t know if I’m distressed by that. One is bound to feel the difference between these poor, dark, very small houses, the people in the streets, and yourself because you always have the chance of taking a plane out. Basically you are a fortunate traveller, a visitor; your luck is that you can always leave. And it’s hard to imagine that there are people around you unable, incapable of leaving either because of money or because of any number of ties. And yet the more I come back here the less I feel that I’m a prodigal or a castaway returning. And it may be that as it deepens with age, you get more locked into what your life is and where you’ve come from and what you misunderstand and what you should have understood and what you’re trying to reunderstand and so on.

I'll continue to come back to see if what I write is not beyond the experience of the person sitting next to me on the bus—not in terms of talking down to that person, but of sharing that person's pain and strength necessary in those pathetically cruel circumstances in which people have found themselves following the devastations of colonialism.²⁰

The passage hardly needs commentary, except to say that while Walcott may have said that he didn't know if he was distressed by the necessity, as well as choice, of leaving, he seemed to be expressing the opposite feeling at just about the same time: his interview with Hirsch took place in mid-June 1985 while he was still working on the poem, the first published version of which appeared the following year in *The Paris Review*.²¹ The passage offers additional refutation of the notion of Walcott's radical subversion of ethnic and national loyalties, as we shall see below. Indeed, the specific concern about not writing anything "beyond the experience of the person sitting next to me on the bus" suggests that the poem he eventually wrote is a poetic rendition of the heart-felt emotion he expresses here. In his head-note to the interview, Hirsch describes that early draft of "The Light of the World" as "a large poem of guilt and expiation," adding that it "gives a good sense of Walcott's inner feelings." But in line with a protocol that emphasises, often exclusively, only those implications—as Breslin

²⁰ See Edward Hirsch, "The Art of Poetry XXXVIII: Derek Walcott," in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, ed. William Baer (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 95-121, at 115.

²¹ In Issue 101 of Winter 1986; it would seem Breslin wrongly cites *Partisan Review*.

observes—"that pertain to writing,"²² Terada dwells on Walcott's punning on the word "abandonment," since for her the word "inevitably accompanies figuration" and "writing ... marks the site of perpetually abandoned presence" (220).

Breslin describes Terada's reading as telling only "half the truth" because it "thins out the social complexity of the poem"²³ and provides an alternate interpretation. With respect to modes of apprehending beauty in the (non)light of the difficulty posed by the poem's setting (a minibus at dusk) and which Terada presses to her argument about its inderterminate meaning, Breslin sees not the language of postmodernism but that of Platonism (236), yet even he seems to dither in answering the question whether or not Walcott's "longing for a transcendent center [is] related to the longing for an earthly center, for 'home'" (235). Breslin seems to want to answer yes, especially given the persuasive way he counters Terada by highlighting the social, as opposed to the merely textual, with a folksy interpretation of the narrator's sense of alienation—abandonment in the poem—that Terada sees as proof of a postmodernist sensibility. But the closest Breslin comes to affirming that intimation is in asserting Walcott's divided identity: "both grounded in and estranged from his St. Lucian origins" (237), which, though true, does not move the reader closer to

²² Paul Breslin, *Nobody's Nation*, 237. Michael Dash ploughs the same postmodernist furrow as Terada in *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998, at page 105) by claiming that Walcott "enacts the drama of displacement and the impossibility of possessing any ultimate truth."²² Dash thus underlines the shibboleth of epistemological scepticism which, as evident in the ensuing discussion of Jahan Ramazani's poetics of hybridity, brings the argument closer home on the specific question of identity.

²³ Paul Breslin, *Nobody's Nation*, 237.

the longing for home he aptly discerns. And it is this theme of dividedness, of an ambiguous or indeterminate identity, cited as evidence of Walcott's postmodernism, that Jahan Ramazani celebrates under the well-known sign of hybridity, the import of which is that the historical wound of slavery and colonialism as experienced in the Caribbean can somehow be a free-floating signifier.

In *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English*, Ramazani seeks primarily to correct the neglect, often tending towards outright exclusion, of English language poetry written on the periphery from the canon of contemporary poetry, and, surprisingly, from postcolonial discourse as well.²⁴ For the task, Ramazani focussed on the poetry of four indisputably postcolonial writers—Walcott and his fellow Caribbean, Louise Bennett; the Indian A. K. Ramanujan; and the late Ugandan poet, Okot p'Bitek—as well as on W. B. Yeats, doing so by joining the trend of reading Irish literature as postcolonial, popularised by Edward Said.²⁵ The critical consensus is that Ramazani's book succeeds immensely in making the case for postcolonial poetry in the curriculum and the canon-making anthologies of the Western cultural institution. For instance, a reviewer described *The Hybrid Muse* as a “brilliant and groundbreaking book that eloquently challenges and creatively complicates our understanding of the scope of modern poetry in English.”²⁶ But if there is universal praise for Ramazani's

²⁴ Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 3; subsequently within the text.

²⁵ See Section III, entitled “Yeats and Decolonization” in Chapter Three of Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 265-288.

²⁶ See Lee M. Jenkins, “Hybrid Muse or Mulatto of Style: ‘Contact Zones of Postcoloniality,’” *Contemporary Literature* XLIII, (3) 575-585, at 580.

achievement with respect to his primary goal, there seems nonetheless discernible unease with the claims he makes about the essence of postcolonial poetry and its poetics of identity. Thus, Lynn Innes begins her review by remarking that *The Hybrid Muse* is a “thoughtful” but “challenging, and often challengeable book,” and seems to reiterate this view when she says that Ramazani’s effort to “rescue” Yeats and Walcott from the attacks of nationalist and postcolonial critics is “not always” convincing.²⁷ In his review, Steve Burt also appears to make the same point, even if obliquely, with the repeated use of the phrase “largely convincing” to describe the essays in the book.²⁸ Regrettably, neither Innes nor Burt offers a specific challenge or gives any detail of their misgivings, the source of which, it is possible to speculate, might not be too far from Ramazani’s vigorous positing of hybridity or cultural in-betweenness as the defining characteristic of postcolonial writing, with Yeats as the paradigmatic postcolonial poet. Yeats is the subject of the first individual chapter, which serves to underline his ascribed representativeness. “Too anglicized to be Irish and too ‘gaelicized’ to be English, the Anglo-Irish Yeats typifies the interstitial (sic) writer of the postcolonial world” (37), Ramazani asserts. Regarding this claim, Burt comments that it may be “common sense for confirmed Yeatsians; other readers may be shocked, or pleased.” My suspicion is that shock might be the readier response to a similar formulation with a writer whose postcoloniality is less debatable than Yeats’s. Consider: “Too anglicised to be Yoruba and too Yoruba-ised to

²⁷ See Lynn Innes’s untitled review in *Research in African Literatures*, 35.3 (Fall 2004): 178-179.

²⁸ See Steve Burt’s review in *College Literature* 30.3 (Summer 2003): 157-59.

be English/Western, Soyinka. ..." Or say, Achebe, Ngugi, Brathwaite, etc.

What is troubling about Ramazani's paradigm is precisely what I have been discussing: the propensity to read postmodernly. Ramazani is aware of the hotly contested notion of hybridity within postcolonial studies on the ground—quoting his own summary of the debate—that it “depoliticizes” the condition it supposedly describes “by suppressing asymmetries of power” (38) and for “presupposing a false antithesis of purity.” Yet Ramazani mounts his argument “notwithstanding” these demurrals for purely aesthetic reasons, because unlike what he reductively characterizes as

baldly political conceptualizations of postcoloniality as anticolonialism, nationalism, and Third-Worldism, hybridity is potentially more responsive to the aesthetic complexity of literary texts. Whereas an idea like anticolonialism or nationalism can barely account for the intricate texture of a literary work, an idea like hybridity or creolization invites the exegete to attend to the intercultural tensions and fusions at the level of language, style, concept, and genre. (36)

At least two assumptions inform this view: one, that the concepts of anticolonialism, nationalism and Third-Worldism—irrespective of *how* they are mobilised as mediating theories—are necessarily “bald,” that is, vulgar and unsophisticated; and, two, that there is, presumably, no other theoretical framework outside hybridity adequate to the formal challenges posed by the postcolonial text. Ramazani seems to be

suggesting that it is only under the prism of linguistic indeterminacy that the text can yield its intricacy or complexity. But this, quite simply, is not the case. When the Caribbean novelist and critic, Wilson Harris, reflects on the dialectical entwining of “freedom and complexity” in “the march of events”²⁹ that shapes the critical imagination of the postcolonial writer, he certainly does so with a mind to laying bare the intercultural tensions and fusions at the level of language, style, concept, and genre with specific reference to Soyinka’s *The Road*. Harris may not have done so as a poststructuralist theorist preoccupied with the non-referentiality of the play’s language—that is, at the simplistic level of a naturalistic sign-object correspondence—or of the (post)colonial malaise that forms its plot, but his desire to “penetrate partial images”³⁰ is surely another way of avoiding the pitfalls of essentialist identity constructs through unproblematic referentiality. For Harris, this interpretive move—which seems to me as aesthetic as it is hermeneutic—“evoke[s] inner links and correspondences with stranger cultures” that leads “towards a goal of profound self-awareness.” Indeed, the resultant open-endedness or fluidity of the image of self and society that emerges from Harris’s insight is couched in diction that would be recognisable to the poststructuralist. The goal of profound self-awareness, he says, “remains ceaselessly unfinished or drawn towards futurity in an intricate play of partial image upon partial image open to mutual re-

²⁹ Wilson Harris, “The Complexity of Freedom” in *Perspectives on Wole Soyinka: Freedom and Complexity*, ed. Biodun Jeyifo (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 51-61, at 52.

³⁰ Wilson Harris, “The Complexity of Freedom” in *Perspectives on Wole Soyinka: Freedom and Complexity*, 54.

visualizations, intricate exploration backwards and forwards within a world that alters to re-educate itself into flexible limits in the living we take for granted as exploiter and exploited” (54-55). What distinguishes Harris’s critical vision is that his acceptance of such mutual imbrications, of the postcolonial writer’s evocation of inner links and correspondences with stranger cultures—in a word, social complexity—is not at the expense of the uniqueness of her historical experience and that of her audience, which is why for him the penetration of partial images is a condition for the “evolution of community” (ibid). Partiality, which must rely for completion on the other, becomes a given of postcoloniality; thus, any authentic gesture of freedom is necessarily masked by the historical restrictions that it sets out to break. I can think of no better formulation of the dialectic of freedom and complexity in the postcolonial text than the following:

There is no decision or originality of gesture and freedom of movement that can be authentic unless as it arises to consciousness it confesses to how it is still masked, in some degree, by the very conditions from which it arises, by past education or propaganda, past or present insecurities and anxieties, by the historical restriction it partially breaks. And as it so confesses it points intuitively to the reality of freedom, the complexity of freedom, as an unfathomable decision that varies with the cloak of age or biased history it unravels. (53)

What all of this speaks to is the unique historical experience that the postcolonial text both re-presents and seeks to transform without

giving up its particular horizon of meaning, and it would seem incapable of being fully penetrated or exhausted by a mere aesthetic approach—as indeed all baldly political conceptualizations.³¹ Any predisposition to privilege the writing or linguistic aspects of the text runs the considerable danger of thinning out its social dimensions, as Breslin has noted.

Beyond the general postmodern proclivity to the instability of the sign, however, is a certain logic imposed by Ramazani's goal, and hence his valorisation of the purely aesthetic. The neglect of poetry and the elevation of narrative fiction as the exemplary postcolonial genre of self-representation has been mostly justified on the ground that poetry "is a less transparent medium by which to recuperate the history, politics, and sociology of postcolonial societies."³² Ramazani rightly claims, however, that precisely because poetry is defined by "paradox and multivalent symbols, irony and metaphor" it is the genre "well-suited to mediating and registering the contradictions of split cultural experience ... of living after colonialism, between non-Western traditions and modernity, at a moment of explosive change in the relation between Western and 'native' cultures" (6). The point to make here is that an application of the concept of hybridity to the poetic postcolonial text qua text, that is, as a purely aesthetic exercise, does in fact yield many of the insights and pleasures that Ramazani brilliantly highlights in each of his cases; enough to show that

³¹ For more on how the complexity of the postcolonial text can be critically realized outside Ramazani's hybridity framework, see in general all the essays in *Perspectives on Wole Soyinka*, but in particular Jeyifo's Introduction and featured essay, "Wole Soyinka and the Tropes of Disalienation."

³² Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse*, 4.

postcolonial poetry is the equal of English poetry wherever written. As the quoted passage in which he contrasts the concept of hybridity to other conceptualisations suggests, however, this leads to an evaluative stance that tends to deny the postcolonial writer an interpretive horizon, a locus of referentiality, on the ground that hybridity puts him or her “beyond identitarian boundaries” (ibid). The focus on figurality, as we saw with Terada, tends, then, to gesture towards an affirmation of cultural identity only to retreat in homage to the overriding notion of indeterminacy. Thus, in a passage where Ramazani remarks about the seeming incompatibility of metaphor and postcoloniality from “the perspective of ... identity politics,” he can see only what he calls “the spiralling of the wound motif in *Omeros*” which in turn reveals how Walcott’s poetic imagination “in its restless work of discovering and creating resemblances, confound (sic) tribal, ethnic, or national limits” (69), precisely because his poetry is “less respectful of racial, regional, [and] national loyalties” (68). At this point, Ramazani’s specific argument becomes somewhat unclear: is it that Walcott’s poetry and poetics are pointedly subversive of national and ethnic identity, that is, beyond identitarian boundaries, or just “less respectful” of them? In which case, it becomes a matter of degrees of loyalty depending on the interpreter? In further asserting that Walcott’s wound motif “exemplifies the slipperiness and polyvalence of poetic discourse that circulates between races, crossing lines of class and community, bridging differences between West Indian fisherman and Greek warrior (ibid),” Ramazani prepares the way for the major premise of his postmodernly reading: the instability and non-

referentiality of a sign (here the wound) and so its lack of cultural specificity. Far from mirroring Jameson's national allegory as "a trope of unproblematic referentiality" that would make it "stand for the particular historical experience of a particular race in a particular part of the world," Ramazani argues, Walcott's deployment of the wound metaphor privileges an energetic play on its instability. Quoting Elaine Scarry, Ramazani insists that the wound does not instance "the perfect, unambiguous allegory of Afro-Caribbean history" but a "nonreferentiality that rather than eliminating all referential activity instead gives it a frightening freedom of referential activity" (65).

Leaving aside the apparent contradiction in the claim on reference, we see once again that a contentious assumption informs his view and it is to be found in the key phrases "perfect, unproblematic allegory" and "unambiguous referentiality." For the obvious question is what happens where no such assumptions underline a differing theoretical concept of the postcolonial text, but which yet seeks to recover from the maze of literary tropes and allusions a "powerful homing instinct" or "longing for an earthly and transcendent center," as Breslin opines concerning Walcott? And on reference, Ramazani quotes Scarry as saying that the wound, far from erasing all referential activity, gives it even more power to refer. To what, then, does it refer, after we have parsed every pun, mapped every metaphor, charted the course of every journey beyond local or regional boundaries; when the spiralling of the wound is less dizzying or, even, has ceased temporarily? Would the so-called instability of the wound as a sign still be so confounding as to expunge from Philoctete's mind the historical specificity and meaning

delineating both the national (the village is in St. Lucia) cum racial boundaries of experience that he attaches to his affliction? Can we, in fact, say of Philoctete (or Hector, or Achille, or Helen, or Ma Kilman despite her initial Catholicism) that they are respectively too Europeanised to be St Lucian and too St Lucian to be European? We here recall what Walcott's narrator says of Philoctete:

He believed the swelling came from the chained ankles
of his grandfathers. Or else why was there no cure?
That the cross he carried was not only the anchor's

but that of his race, for a village black and poor
as the pigs that rooted in its burning garbage ...³³

Pushing his notion of non-referentiality further, Ramazani holds that "by attaching the wound to the name Philoctete and to a black body, Walcott already contaminates and disrupts the specificities demanded by national allegory. "Discourses of realist fiction and of nationalist politics," he writes, "might seek to control and even defeat the 'referential instability' of the wound, affixing it to a particular people, motive, or cause. But by attaching the wound trope to the name of Philoctete and to a black body, Walcott already contaminates and disrupts the specificities demanded by "national allegory" (65). Again Ramazani's discursive premise unwittingly perpetrates a sense of the false antithesis of purity that critics of hybridity allege. Walcott, he says, "contaminates" the national allegory, yet one cannot speak of contamination without presuming purity. But why does Ramazani,

³³ Derek Walcott, *Omeros*, 19.

who as early as the introductory chapter quotes Eliot to the effect that “No art is more stubbornly national than poetry” and understands that “postcolonial poets, even when staying at home, have long inhabited cultural spaces that are thoroughly multilingual and multicultural” (7) take this premise? He quotes from Yeats’s essay, “Nationality and Literature” to the same effect: “we can learn from English and other literatures without loss of national individuality” (40), and further in another essay—when, as Ramazani puts it, he was attacked “like such later writers as Walcott, Rushdie, Soyinka, Naipaul, and Amitaz Ghosh for insufficient nativism”—thus: “A writer is no less National because he shows the influence of other countries and of great writers of the world,” adding that “No nation ... since the beginning of history, has ever drawn all its life out of itself” (47-48). This fact is reiterated in various forms throughout the book and seems to keep the national allegory alive even as he alleges its displacement by figurality.

Moreover, by obscuring the particular historical experience of the wounded subjects of his study, Ramazani fails to see that the name Philoctete, thanks to slavery and colonialism,³⁴ is as Caribbean as it is Greek. Consequently, he does not accord due weight to the interrogation of naming as a crucial site for mapping and recuperating identity in Walcott—hence, for instance, Achille’s symbolic renaming as Afolabe when he returns to Africa. Walcott explains how commonplace the classical Greek names of Hector, Ajax, Achilles, and

³⁴ On the role of slavery in localizing classical or European names, in republican Rome as in the Caribbean, see Orlando Paterson’s *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 54-58.

Helen, are in the Caribbean in the piece, “Reflections on *Omeros*,”³⁵ in a special edition of *The South Atlantic Quarterly*. And as he put it in an interview, Hector “is a guy who drives a public taxi.”³⁶ In that same interview which he gave while still composing *Omeros*, Walcott explained that a part of what he sought to do in the poem was “trying to hear the names of things and people in their own context,”—in other words, a particular people in a particular part of the world—“meaning everything named in a noun, and everything around a name” (ibid). It cannot be in pursuance of some broadly “transnational allegory,” then, that Walcott sets for himself the goal of revealing the real cultural features of a people and place buried under imperial encrustations; certainly not the object he describes as follows: “You see maybe the whole West Indian experience is not itself—it is translated. There is a film over the name, Caribbean. You can see the object, but between the object and you there is some experience, some artifice. We look through a glass in which the noun on the other side has not yet been named. It’s the origin of the *real* Caribbean nouns that I’m after” (ibid; my emphasis). Can it be said that this experience between the real Caribbean object and its beholder is not unique to the Caribbean in some particular and significant ways? When, in the light of his pan-Antillean vision of a fused West Indian identity, and the fact that his character, Achille, unlike himself, can be said to have a niche in the world, he was asked if he thought he did not “fit in one world,” Walcott

³⁵ See Derek Walcott, “Reflections on *Omeros*” in *The Poetics of Derek Walcott: Intertextual Perspectives*, ed. Gregson Davis, special issue of *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 96:2 (Spring 1997), 238-239.

³⁶ See J. P. White, “An Interview with Derek Walcott” in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, ed. William Baer (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 173

was very unambiguous in disavowing that claim. When reminded of his status as a professor at Boston University, he riposted with his preference for the beaches of the Caribbean: “All the time I’m teaching I want to be on the beach swimming.” Admitting the point about the freedom of movement—or choice of being a cosmopolitan—of a figure such as him, Walcott stresses that he “would really prefer to be working and writing and painting in the Caribbean,” and concludes, “I know exactly where I want to be.”³⁷ And even more unambiguously, that he had never felt that he belonged “anywhere else but in St. Lucia.”

This unambiguous filial identification with home, coupled with an instinct to return whenever he should be abroad, I argue, constitute the core of Walcott’s poetic vision; it is what helps to situate “Philoctete’s primacy” and “the trauma of slavery”³⁸ at the heart of the narrative achievement of *Omeros*. Ramazani’s aestheticist claim that the wound, though admittedly the “emblem of convulsive, bodily pain” nevertheless only serves to “poeticise” pain, or that because Walcott is open to the wounds of others who have similarly suffered under the imperial lash he thereby “deconstructs experiential uniqueness” tells only one side of the story and that from a decidedly anti-identitarian perspective. One can be a nationalist, and also an inter- or trans-nationalist, as Frantz Fanon made clear with his famous assertion that “[i]t is at the heart of national consciousness that international

³⁷ See Rebekah Presson, “The Man Who Keeps the English Language Alive: An Interview with Derek Walcott,” in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, 193.

³⁸ Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse*, 71.

consciousness lives and grows.”³⁹ The passage is worth commending to theorists of hybridity impelled to the aporetic “neither-nor” formulation—for instance, Ramazani on Walcott, “neither a Eurocentric nor an Afrocentric poet” (64)—as a premise for reading the postcolonial writer under the sign of hybridity or cosmopolitanism:

If man is known by his acts, then we will say that the most urgent thing today for the intellectual is to build up his nation. If this building up is true, that is to say if it interprets the manifest will of the people ... then the building of a nation is of necessity accompanied by the discovery and encouragement of universalizing values. Far from keeping aloof from other nations, therefore, it is the national liberation which leads the nation to play its part on the stage of history. It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows. And this two-fold emerging is ultimately only the source of all culture. (247-248)

To conclude my argument here, which seeks to establish the locus of referentiality of the wound whose healing is critical to the health of the postcolonial body-politic, I will return to Walcott’s persona in *Omeros* on the impact and effect of all the perambulations and intercultural parallels that are alleged to radically deconstruct national specificity. One motif, among many others in the book, powerfully asserts Walcott’s homing instinct: that, first, of his dead father, and then the eponymous character, Seven Seas/Omeros, pointedly enjoining him to

³⁹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 247-48.

return home as a ship to its anchor after every journeying forth. Walcott's father first appears to him in that moving scene that starts in his grandmother's house from whose window he saw as a child old women carrying coal to ocean liners, the ant-like line of their march allegorised as the vital link to ancestral memory. Walcott's father first charges him to "simplify / your life to one emblem, a sail leaving harbour // and a sail coming in"⁴⁰ before urging him to pay deserving homage through his art to the women's suffering. And after Walcott had crossed his meridian, in the midst of his reverse middle passage journeys to North America, Portugal and Britain, his father appears again to remind him of his native attachments; to ensure "our island" is his lodestar. "Once you have seen everything and gone everywhere," he says, "cherish our island for its green simplicities, / enthrone yourself, if your sheet is a barber-chair, // a sail leaving harbour and a sail coming in." Crucially, and this for the symbolism of the sea-swift as the bearer of the seed that sprouts the healing herb and whose transatlantic flights suture the ancestral African homeland with the New World home of the (ex)slave—"I followed a sea-swift to both sides of this text; // ... Her wing-beat carries these islands to Africa, / she sewed the Atlantic rift with a needle's line" (319)—his father drives the message home with an image of the bird: "The sea-swift vanishes in rain, / and yet in its travelling all that the sea-swift does / it does in a circular pattern. Remember that son" (187-88). *Seven Seas*, for his part, echoes this injunction with a further metaphorical flourish when he tells Walcott in the final book of the poem that there are two

⁴⁰ Derek Walcott, *Omeros*, 72.

journeys in every odyssey. While the one takes the voyager to places where he is a stranger—“cities where people speak / a different language, or look at him differently”—the “right journey” on the other hand “is motionless.” In other words, you can be cosmopolitan all you want but never be truly removed from home, all the journeys outward being as motionless as the sense created by the sea as it “moves round an island // that appears to be moving” the same way “love moves round the heart.” In the end, “the slowly travelling hand / knows it returns to the port from which it must start.”⁴¹ Seven Seas concludes his exhortation with a claim that directly rebuts Ramazani’s notion of a non-referentiality that deconstructs Walcott’s national allegory:⁴²

⁴¹ This, Ramazani might argue, is no different from the rooted cosmopolitanism that he concedes, in line with the notions of “vernacular cosmopolitanism” and “discrepant cosmopolitanism” advocated by Homi Bhabha (whose theoretical formulations of postcoloniality—indeed, of “modern society” at large—as a condition defined by hybridity and in-betweenness, are the fulcrum of his argument) and James Clifford, respectively. Rooted cosmopolitanism can be distinguished from the sort of national consciousness that Walcott adumbrates here, clearly informed by actual residence (even if partially) in the home country, or a homing instinct that is different from the primary metropolitan identification and positioning of the cosmopolitan who is not only wholly domiciled in the West but does not even contemplate a return except as a visitor. For more on this crucial difference as well as the way it mediates attitudes to the nation/state (and national allegories), see for example Pheng Cheah, “The Cosmopolitical Today” and “Given Culture: Rethinking Cosmopolitical Freedom in Transnationalism” in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, eds. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); and Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), 68-69.

⁴² Perhaps I should point out that I am not hereby adopting wholesale Jameson’s argument. Indeed his thesis was the subject of considerable controversy, beginning with Aijaz Ahmad’s strong protest at being construed as Jameson’s “civilizational Other.” See Aijaz Ahmad, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory,’” originally published in *Social Text*, 17 (Fall 1986): 3-25, and reproduced in his *In Theory*, 95-122. I do, however, share—as Ahmad—in “the general plea” (*In Theory*, 95) of the essay aimed at opening up the Western academy to literatures produced in the “Third World,” a need that Ramazani also seeks to address almost half a decade later in *The Hybrid Muse* with specific reference to postcolonial poetry. My sympathies with Jameson’s position lie in the confluence of what he describes in his response to Ahmad as “the way we are all *situated* and determined socially and ideologically by our multiple class positions” [*Social Text*, 17 (Fall 1987): 27; original emphasis].

“Therefore, this is what this island has meant to you, / ... why the sea-swift was sent to you: / to circle yourself and your island with this art” (291).

But Ramazani would push his claim as far as he can, against evidence presented by the text. Thus, commenting on the moment when, after due penance, Ma Kilman is possessed by the African gods prior to the healing herb being revealed to her, Ramazani writes that Walcott “flirts momentarily with the concept of race-based blood inheritance of African belief” (60). But rather than a fleeting digression, that moment, it seems to me, constitutes the ethico-political narrative sinew of *Omeros*. That it is not a passing lapse in judgement, but, rather, a position arrived at after a very long period of reflection is underscored by Walcott’s earlier conviction about the unviability of trans-oceanic memory; in particular, the “truth” of the futility of “holding the god captive” [the god being Ogun] he claims dawned on him and members of his theatre company when they produced Soyinka’s play, *The Road*. To Walcott and his “Afro-Christian” company, “the naming of the god estranged” them. Ogun, for them, was “an exotic” and not a force. They could “pretend to enter his power” but he “would never possess us, for our invocations were not prayer but devices.”⁴³ As will be seen below, Ma Kilman completely reverses this view and shows Walcott now believing that they could, after all, actually enter into the power of, and be possessed by, the African gods: Ogun, Sango, and Erzulie in *Omeros*. Indeed, given Ma Kilman’s primacy to the narrative of healing through a symbolic return

⁴³ Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says*, 8.

to the past for reconciliation with ancestral origins—and Ramazani admits the trope of return to Africa is “key to healing the torn black body and racial memory of the Caribbean”—it would seem an instance of straining against the text to describe Walcott’s revised view as a momentary flirtation with, or a case of him sinning against himself by “committing, a “cardinal Walcottian sin” (59). Perhaps the problem is with Ramazani’s phraseology, “race-based blood inheritance.” It may, however, be pointed out that Walcott, for good or bad, is not above such biologism—though he might be more inclined to call it a spiritual or primal thing.⁴⁴ Soon after his father’s injunction to him to always return home after his wanderings abroad, Walcott expresses his sense of national identity as he begins his ruminations among the Sioux in the Dakotas thus:

Men take their colours

as the trees do from the native soil of their birth,
and once they are moved elsewhere, entire cultures
lose the art of mimicry, and then, where the trees were,

the fir, the palm, the olive, the cedar, a desert place
widens in the heart. (207-08)

But if we were to agree for a moment with Ramazani, wouldn’t such essentialism be argument in favour of Walcott’s bounded identity politics? For as far as imagery of rootedness goes, none can be more concrete as that of a tree drawing its life and leafage from the soil in which it is planted. And it is what it means to speak of uprootedness

⁴⁴ See, for instance, the interview with Hirsch, almost a decade before *Omeros*, “The Art of Poetry,” in *Critical Perspectives*, 65-83, particularly at 72 and 79.

as the very meaning of literal death (for a tree or plant) and social death for a human being. And this, in fact, leads to my next argument.

**“You all see what it’s like without roots in this world?” Acting-Out
and Working-Through Trauma**

Having established the locus of referentiality and experiential particularity of the wound I will now turn to the question of its healing. A point we must note right away: prior to its healing, the wound most graphically manifests itself in the phenomenon of acting-out. This wound has been aptly described as a trauma, with Walcott providing one of its best poetic evocations cited in the previous chapter. On the surface, “Laventille” is a lyrical reflection on the “grinding poverty” of the hilltop slum of Port-of-Spain in Trinidad that gives the poem its title, but in tracing the cause of this poverty Walcott invokes the middle passage directly—“The middle passage never guessed its end”—and indirectly—“some open passage that has cleft the brain.” The violent uprooting Walcott describes in the last nine lines of the poem is so radically overwhelming as to have “cleft the brain” culminating in a “deep, amnesiac blow”:

Something inside is laid wide like a wound,

some open passage that has cleft the brain,
some deep, amnesiac blow. We left
somewhere a life we never found,

customs and gods that are not born again,
some crib, some grille of light

clanged shut on us in bondage, and withheld

us from that world below us and beyond,
and in its swaddling cerements we're still bound.⁴⁵

In the passage quoted in the Introduction, Edouard Glissant, through a series of rhetorical questions, underlines a similar characterisation of the Caribbean's wound as a trauma, sketching its pathological progress from original wound to its inherited form, and it is worth recalling here:

Would it be ridiculous to consider our lived history as a steadily advancing neurosis? To see the Slave Trade as a traumatic shock, our relocation (in the new land) as a repressive phase, slavery as the period of latency, "emancipation" in 1848 as reactivation, our everyday fantasies as symptoms, and even our horror of "returning to those things of the past" as a possible manifestation of the neurotic's fear of his past? Would it not be useful and revealing to investigate such a parallel? What is repressed in our history persuades us, furthermore, that this is more than an intellectual game.⁴⁶

Glissant thus precedes Cathy Caruth in calling for a reading of history as the history of trauma⁴⁷—at least, with respect to New World history.

⁴⁵ Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems*, 88.

⁴⁶ Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 65-66.

⁴⁷ See Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*. Caruth sees the "central question" of Freud's enquiry into the "relationship between history and its political outcomes" in *Moses and Monotheism*—his speculative history of the Jews—as that of what it means "for history to be the history of trauma." See Chapter 1, "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History," at page 15. But see also

In what follows, I align myself with Glissant's view that such an approach to the further exploration of the phenomenon of the Caribbean's wound of history is more than an intellectual game. And in that spirit, I will now highlight Walcott's more explicit depiction of this trauma in *Omeros* through a brief elaboration of the concepts of acting-out and working-through. Shortly after the opening scene where he displays his wound to tourists, Walcott shows us Philoctete in the grip of a maddening vortex of pain caused by it. Wracked by the pain, Philoctete limps from Ma Kilman's ironically named No Pain Café to his yam garden where, armed with a cutlass, he maniacally cuts down his yams. Here is a crucial part of the resultant scene:

The wind turned the yam leaves like maps of Africa,
their veins bled white, as Philoctete, hobbling, went

between the yam beds like a patient growing weaker
down a hospital ward. His skin was a nettle,
his head a market of ants; he heard the crabs groan

from arthritic pincers, he felt a mole-cricket drill
his sore to the bone. His knee was radiant iron,
his chest was a sack of ice, and behind the bars

of his rusted teeth, like a mongoose in a cage,
a scream was mad to come out; his tongue tickled its claws
on the roof of his mouth, rattling its bars in rage.

He saw the blue smoke from the yards, the bamboo poles
weighed down by nets, the floating feather of the priest.

Dominick LaCapra's caveat regarding the danger of thereby not only postulating trauma as "the condition of possibility of history" but also of its being "generalized and conflated with history" itself. See LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 14n.

When cutlass cut smoke, when cocks surprise their arseholes

*by shitting eggs, he cursed, black people go get rest
from God; at which point a fierce cluster of arrows
targeted the sore, and he screamed in vain in the yam rows.*

He stretched out the foot. He edged the razor-sharp steel
through the pleading finger and thumb. The yam leaves recoiled
in a cold sweat. He hacked every root at the heel.

He hacked them at the heel, noticing how they curled,
head-down without their roots. He cursed the yams:

“Salope!

You all see what it’s like without roots in this world?”⁴⁸ (21-22)

Philoctete’s scream, which he manages to utter against the seeming impossibility of speech—his trauma is also a sort of linguistic prison denoted synecdochically by his mouth as a cage and his teeth bars that his tongue merely rattles in rage—telescopes the complex nature of trauma as a mode of experience cognisable only within “a history larger than any single individual or any single generation.”⁴⁹ While the scene highlights poignantly Philoctete’s personal crisis of identity to the point of total self-dissolution (into temporary madness), it also evokes the race-wide history that unleashed the crisis. Access to this larger history, Walcott suggests, is possible only by going beyond the pathology of individual suffering, hence Philoctete’s loss of sustained speech or dialogue until the communal healing rite—itself possible only after the acknowledgement and working-through of the repressed memory of slavery. As a result, the first of two things Philoctete is able

⁴⁸ Italics original.

⁴⁹ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 71.

to ejaculate through the prison bars of his mouth gives expression not to private, but, communal, grief: “When cutlass cut smoke, when cocks surprise their arseholes / By shitting eggs ... black people go get rest from God.” In his second exclamation, he bemoans his rootlessness and parallels Paul D’s sense of excommunication from the human race discussed in the previous chapter.⁵⁰ Crucial to this moment of literal bondage to the past is Walcott’s diagnosis of “rootlessness” as cause and symptom of Philoctete’s agony. Enacting his condition, he hacks his yams at the heel and notices them curl head-down without their roots, mimicking his abject pose—the “self-hating / gesture of clenching his head tight in both hands” (19)—in Ma Kilman’s cafe just before his pain drove him out to the yam garden. Echoing Walcott’s insistence on a return to the source as the condition for healing in *Midsummer* now elaborated in *Omeros*, the leaves of Philoctete’s yams, before he hews them down, point him to the “native place” with which he must first reconcile: “The wind turned the yam leaves like maps of Africa.”

This scene presents a striking illustration of the psychoanalytic concept of acting-out which, simply, means the compulsive repetition by the victim of a repressed traumatic memory. Its actuating condition is repression, coupled with resistance—an unwillingness to grapple with the memory whenever it should be reawakened. As Freud puts it, “the patient does not *remember* anything of what he has repressed and

⁵⁰ We will recall that Paul D was led by critical self-reflection on the real meaning of the status of manhood ascribed to the male slaves on Sweet Home plantation to conclude that the little mercies of benevolent slavery notwithstanding, “they were only Sweet Home men at Sweet Home” and with just a step off its grounds they became “trespassers among the human race.” See Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, 147-48.

forgotten, but *acts* it out.” In other words, he “reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he *repeats* it, without ... knowing that he is repeating it.”⁵¹ Acting-out, or compulsive repetition, is, then, the way in which a victim remembers what she has forgotten. Yet, as we saw in the preceding chapter, it is at the same time the ironic process by which the mind seeks to master a situation that it was unprepared for and which, by-passing consciousness or the intellectual realm, had entered straight into the unconscious. Consequently, “the compulsion to repeat,” Freud adds, “replaces the impulsion to remember.” Extending his observations beyond the clinic, Freud describes repetition as “a transference of the forgotten past not only on the doctor but also on to all other aspects of the current situation.” As, we might say, Philoctete’s repetition of the repressed memory of his enslavement and ensuing rootlessness is a transference onto current situations in Ma Kilman’s cafe and, particularly, his yam garden. It should be noted also that what is repeated, as Freud asserts, is not the original event itself but everything associated with it that has “already made its way from the sources of the repressed into his manifest personality,” say, for instance, “his inhibitions and unserviceable attitudes and his pathological character-traits.” Equally important is Freud’s observation that the victim experiences his condition as “something real and contemporary” and that any therapeutic work (or social analysis) must consist “in a large measure in tracing it back to the past” (151-52).

⁵¹ Sigmund Freud, “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 12, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1958), 150; original emphases.

LaCapra quotes a definition of acting-out, synthesised from Freud and Jacques Lacan by Laplanche and Pontalis, as “action in which the subject, in the grip of his unconscious wishes and phantasies, relives these in the present with a sensation of immediacy which is heightened by his refusal to recognize their source and their repetitive character.”⁵² It might be pointed out that Philoctete does seem to be aware of the source of his suffering, but surely only apparently so. There is a key difference between such vague awareness and a *conscious* wish to recognise or acknowledge the past it points to. As LaCapra notes, Laplanche and Pontalis adopt a mainly clinical perspective that may not be immediately applicable to theoretical issues, but nonetheless finds their work relevant to the extent that they “address psychoanalytic processes that may not be confined to clinical contexts or to the individual alone” (ibid). Acting-out, then, shows the victim seemingly immobilised within a self-defeating cycle of repetition, as opposed to working-through which alone points to the possibility of breaking that cycle as the victim comes to “accept certain repressed elements”—what is popularly known as coming to terms with an unhappy situation. The “successful” working-through of a trauma enables the victim eventually to “free himself from the grip of mechanisms of repetition.”⁵³

But as Adorno warned in his essay, “What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?”, it is not what the perpetrators of evil tend to mean by it, which invariably—and with respect to the repressed

⁵² See J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* (1967; New York: Norton, 1973), 4; quoted in LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust*, 208.

⁵³ Quoted by LaCapra in *Representing the Holocaust*, 209.

memory of former Nazis and current sympathisers of German National Socialism that is his immediate subject—is “not ... a serious working-through of the past, the breaking of its spell through an act of clear consciousness,” but, rather, a wish to “turn the page, if possible, wiping it from memory.”⁵⁴ In other words, it is not the popular sentiment of forgive-and-forget or “moving-on.” A true coming-to-terms by working-through the past puts the victim at the centre; it is a turn towards the subject, the “reinforcement” of her “self-consciousness” and, with that, her “sense of self.”⁵⁵ This accords with Freud’s view that the patient himself has to be allowed enough time “to become more conversant with [his] resistance ... to *work through* it, to overcome it” (original emphasis). He warns that working-through can be an arduous task for the victim—as, indeed, for anyone attempting a social analysis of trauma—but stresses nonetheless that it is the part of the work of finding a cure that “effects the greatest changes in the patient.”⁵⁶ This is what Laplanche and Pontalis, again from the more clinical perspective, highlight in their explanation of working-through:

Process by means of which analysis implants an interpretation and overcomes the resistance to which it has given rise. Working-through is taken to be a sort of psychological work which allows the

⁵⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, “What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?”, trans. Timothy Bahti and Geoffrey Hartman, in *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 115.

⁵⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, “What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?” in *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective*, 128.

⁵⁶ Sigmund Freud, “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through,” 155. Freud writes in the context of clinical analysis, and so uses the word “patient” in his essay; I have substituted the word victim when practicable.

subject to accept certain repressed elements and to free himself from the grip of mechanisms of repetition. ...

From the technical point of view, by the same token, working-through is expedited by interpretations from the analyst which consists chiefly in showing how the meanings in question may be recognised in different contexts.⁵⁷

Working-through is not to be understood, however, as a check or counter to acting-out but as itself repetition distinguished only by a growing self-consciousness or agency on the part of the victim. This is the critical factor that enables the victim to increasingly free herself from the compulsion to repeat the trauma. Nor is acting-out to be seen as constituting a clean and separate phase from working-through; the two are better viewed as a continuum differentiated by the degree of self-consciousness allowing the victim the crucial agency for accepting “certain repressed elements” and so to break the compulsion to repeat. The two terms, in other words, do not indicate a movement from one to the other in which, as LaCapra puts it, “the latter is ... the dialectical transcendence of the former.” Indeed, LaCapra adds, acting-out may never be fully overcome and may be “intimately bound up” with the problems of working-through.⁵⁸ Walcott evinces this interconnectedness in the acting-out passage above by gesturing towards its inherent working-through possibilities in one deft line. While a fly quickly washes its hands off the massacre in the yam garden—let’s call this a mimesis of Philoctete’s resistance or denial—a swift, the all-

⁵⁷ As quoted in LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust*, 209.

⁵⁸ Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust*, 205.

important bearer of the healing herb—is quietly perched on a branch above him: “He looked up at a blue acre / and a branch where a swift settled without a cry.” Walcott further enriches the imagery by preceding the swift with an ant that crawls across Philoctete’s brow” (how intimate this can be!), with ants figured as the vital link to ancestral memory in association with the coal-bearing grandmothers seen from his [Walcott’s] childhood window.⁵⁹ Both swift and ants will be the governing metaphors of the working-through of the Caribbean’s trauma, with the Obeah-woman, Ma Kilman, as medium (in both senses of the word).

Given the uncanny coincidence of Walcott’s delineation of trauma at the precise moment that he is reflecting on the existential issue posed by slums and poverty, it is worth stressing that any feasible process of working-through historical trauma must be more concerned with socio-economic questions than the merely pathological or therapeutic. Fanon, who was, perhaps, the first to read colonial history under the prism of trauma goes beyond his “clinical study” in *Black Skin, White Masks* to prescribe precisely such a procedure, as we have seen.⁶⁰ In the view of LaCapra, social or theoretical analysis can achieve historical specificity only through an “ethicopolitical approach” that extends the concept of working-through beyond a “narrowly therapeutic framework.” For him, “working through the past in any viable, durable, and politically relevant manner would itself demand a careful critical analysis of social and economic institutions both over

⁵⁹ Derek Walcott, *Omeros*, 21.

⁶⁰ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 10-12.

time and in contemporary life.” Even then, and as already noted, a successful working through of a traumatic experience, including its posttraumatic effects, requires, as a precondition, its acknowledgement. But what may be called a successful working through can really be no more than “*work on the posttraumatic symptoms* in order to mitigate the effects of trauma by generating counterforces to compulsive repetition (or acting-out), thereby enabling a more viable articulation of affect and cognition or representation, as well as ethical and socio-political agency, in the present and the future.”⁶¹ It does not mean “total redemption” from that past or “healing of its wounds.” James Berger, who prefers the term post-apocalyptic for post-traumatic, reiterates both views. “Only if traumas are remembered,” he says, “can they lose, gradually but never entirely, their traumatic effects.”⁶²

**“I Felt Every Wound Pass”: From African Babble through Greek
Manure to a Language that Carries its Cure**

As the title and the beginning of this chapter indicate, Walcott’s self-confessed love of the English language has never been for its own sake. A product as much of his colonial education as of his social location at the protean nexus of several languages and cultures, his ear has always remained finely tuned to all the carnivalesque code

⁶¹ See Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust* at 210, 218 and 119, respectively; emphasis original.

⁶² See his *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 212.

switchings in the Caribbean with a view to finding the instance that registers the pharmacological merger of pain and cure within the wounded language. In *Midsummer*, Walcott claims that the search for the language that matches wound with word must lead to ancient origins; in *Omeros* he demonstrates that claim. With the suggestive naming of her café, and her early ministrations over Philoctete's wound, we first encounter Ma Kilman as the putative agent of the desired healing. Yet she is very quick to dismiss the first hint of reconciliation with ancestral origins, represented by the musings of the blind griot Old St. Omere/Seven Seas, as "old African babble" or Greek (18). Walcott performs here a narrative staging of amnesia and the acting out of the pain of unclaimed trauma. As a result, Ma Kilman's denial of her origins by this glib dismissal of the African language that encodes it stands in her way to finding the cure for Philoctete as for all the wounded denizens of the Caribbean, the individual wound being at the same time a social laceration.⁶³

⁶³ On this point, Hortense Spillers poses the question whether or not the "phenomenon of marking and branding" the captive body "actually 'transfers' from one generation to another, finding its various *symbolic substitutions* in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments." See her *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 207; emphasis original. The answer proffered by trauma studies would seem to be, Yes, suggesting that the aftermath of a trauma's founding event or series of events, especially where it concerns a collective, an ethnic or racial group, includes a 'postmemory,' or a historical transmission of its memory to individuals and groups living with its "fraught heritage," as for instance the inheritors of the heritage of slavery and the Jewish holocaust. Among scholars who believe in a trans-generational inheritance of trauma is LaCapra, who explains that postmemory "is the acquired memory of those not directly experiencing an event such as the Holocaust or slavery, and that intergenerational transmission of trauma refers to the way those not directly living through an event may nonetheless experience and manifest its posttraumatic symptoms." See *History in Transit*, 108. For the view that there can be no trans-generational transfer of traumatic memory except perhaps as an instance of an unreflective identity project, see Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), and Walter Benn Michaels's "You Who Never Was There': Slavery and the New Historicism—Deconstruction and the Holocaust" in *The*

Recognising the impotence of “the usual medicine” consisting of a flask of liquor, petroleum jelly and ice, she wonders about the true remedy:

It have a flower somewhere, a medicine, and ways
my grandmother would boil it. I used to watch ants
climbing her white flower-pot. But, God, in which place?

Where was this root? What senna, what tepid tisanes,
could clean the branched river of his corrupted blood ...?
(18-19)

Ma Kilman’s potions only achieve the result of mummifying her patient because she is as yet unwilling to seek knowledge of “the old African babble” in which is buried the secret cure for the pain she first dedicates her café to forgetting, and now, healing. And so try as she may, she is unable to recall the name of the curative herb she seeks. As if to give Ma Kilman enough time to come to terms with her repressed past, Walcott begins the needed reconciliation with ancestral origins with a vicarious return to Africa through Achilles. In a sunstroke, the ubiquitous sea-swift drags Achilles’s boat to Africa so he can retrieve his identity, “his name and his soul” (154). It is a sort of reversed middle passage journey in the course of which Achilles encounters his history and the “tribal / sorrow that Philoctete could not drown in alcohol” (129), and, significantly, “the ghost of his

Americanization of the Holocaust, ed. Hilene Flanzbaum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 181-97, whose more nuanced argument seems nevertheless to cut both ways. To the extent that Stanley Crouch’s unconvincing grievances against *Beloved* include the notion that Morrison’s tone calls on the reader to feel an unjustified emotion and that she lacks a true sense of the tragic because she has no true knowledge of the horrors of slavery—even going so far as to describe the novel as a “blackface holocaust novel”—he may also be cited among those who do not believe in the trans-generational transfer of traumatic memory. See his “Aunt Media,” in *New Republic*, Vol. 197, No. 16, of 19 October 1987, 38-43.

father's face" (130). In Africa, Achille feels "the homesick shame / and pain" of "the kingdom from which he had been captured" (136). His father tells him that his name is "Afolabe," not Achille, and instructs him on the significance of naming: "A name means something," and if the "sound" of one's name means nothing, then "you would be nothing" (137). Despite his father's counsel, Achille says of his new name that it is "the gift / of a sound whose meaning I still do not care to know," causing his father to warn him, "if you're content with not knowing what our names mean / then I am not Afolabe, your father, and you look through / my body as the light looks through a leaf ... / And you nameless son, are only the ghost // of a name" (138). Earlier, Afolabe, the father, had asked the son if those who renamed him Achille thought him to be "nothing in that other kingdom" (137). Achille, yet to accept his tribal name, first withdraws to brood by a river then slowly learns to "listen to the moan of the tribe's triumphal sorrow" (139) and accept that the language, the "joined babble" (136) of his distant kin which he did not understand "was his also" (141). Achille inches closer to reconciliation with his lost culture and language during the feast given to celebrate his return. At the dances, the villagers don the same costumes of "plantain trash" as he recalls Philoctete wears at Christmas, and a bannered mitre of bamboo is placed on his head. This reminds Achille of "the same dances // that the mitred warriors did with their bamboo stick / as they scuttered around him" back in the Caribbean, and he cries, "The same, the same" (143). He witnesses a slave raid that leads to the capture of fifteen slaves and in a rage he brains one of the slave-raiders, and by

the time he hears a griot mutter “his prophetic song / of sorrow that would be the past” (148), he has come to terms with “the laceration” of his shame and is able to praise “the epical splendour” of the bare fact of surviving the crossing: “But they crossed, they survived. There is the epical splendour” (149).

Achille’s recuperation of his name and soul after an acknowledgement of the joined babble of his distant kin sets the stage for Ma Kilman’s own conversion from cynical doubt to faith—from denial or repression to acknowledgement of her past. But this quasi-religious conversion, if it is to be salvific, requires total renunciation of previous beliefs that nurture doubt and surrender to new gods through a personal act or oath of allegiance. For, although by chapter forty-seven Ma Kilman can now recall the names of the herbs to heal an array of ailments, she still cannot tell “what path / led through nettles to the cure” and when she reaches to pluck a plant it “keeps its secret” from her” (237). Walcott suggests that Ma Kilman remains barred from the cure because consciousness of self is as yet occluded by her persisting denial of the past, now reinforced by a lingering Catholicism. As she lists several herbs and their healing properties, she is preparing for mass by reciting Hail Mary’s and even when she curses it is “a soft Catholic / curse” (236). That the conflict resulting from her repressed memory can be resolved only in one way is first hinted at by Walcott’s narrator who informs us that Ma Kilman is led “by the nose” from the pews to the forest by the “the reek” of a weed whose power is “rooted in bitterness” (237) and which stood on mulch that had the same smell as Philoctete’s gangrened wound. She is

eventually led to the plant itself by a line of ants “following her from church” (238) “talking,” remarkably, “the language of her great-grandmother.” By this time, however, Ma Kilman “understood” their mission (244), even if the great-grandmothers’ language they spoke must necessarily be the same African babble she had earlier scorned.

But Walcott aptly discerns that *langue* and *parole* must coincide in the would-be healer: Ma Kilman must pull the word (her symbolic sword) from the mesh of weeds to strike at the shield of the forgotten African language. So once in the thicket, the deities demand to be “known by name.” Propitiously, she is genealogically positioned to (re)learn their names as “their sounds are within her / subdued in the rivers of her blood.” Learning the names of the gods is the fundamental act of acceptance of the repressed past. And here we recall how in the preceding chapter, in which Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is discussed, the character, Beloved, as avatar of the African gods, demands to be called her name and once Paul D does so he regains access to his buried past, thus inaugurating his healing. Underlining the critical importance of this moment, we are informed that the power of the deities (Ogun, Shango, Erzulie), though fading, is now “concentrated / in the whorled corolla” (242) of the stinking flower Ma Kilman needs for the cure. But when she calls out to the gods, she gets no answer, as they have “knotted the shouts’ in her throat like a vine”; in other words, she is yet unable to utter the sounds of an African babble buried in her blood. It is as if Walcott has brought the unresolved dilemma of estrangement from the African gods he had grappled with and written about in “What the Twilight Says” to the

forest of Ma Kilman's search for the cure to the racial wound. Unlike then, however, and as already noted above, Walcott now believes that "the naming" of the African gods, far from estranging the New World denizen, would lead to benediction and protection. Consequently, Walcott makes Ma Kilman complete her own symbolic return to the past for reconciliation with the native place. But before she can remember the names of the deities so "the cure can begin," she must first undergo penance. Consequently, Ma Kilman thrashes herself "for the sin / of doubting their names" (243). She performs a ritual of submission that enables her body to be possessed by the spirit of the deities. Indeed, if we follow Loretta Collins's reading, this moment marks Ma Kilman's literal embodiment of the cure. When she "is possessed through obeah," Collins writes, "her body enacts the cure."⁶⁴ Ma Kilman "unbuttons" her church dress, bays like a moon-crazed dog "at the lights moving in the high leaves of the trees," rubs dirt "in her hair" and, crucially, prays "in the language of ants and her grandmother." Finally, she *speaks* the "African babble" and as a result is able at last to "lift / the sore from its roots in Philoctete's rotting shin" (244) by the very act of speaking. By a sleight of narration, we are informed that it is at the precise moment when Ma Kilman performs this ritual that Philoctete, as the entire wounded race, is cured: "Philoctete shook himself up from the bed of his grave, / and felt the pain draining, as surf-flowers sink through sand." And Walcott, in yet another authorial intrusion, reflects, "Feel the shame,

⁶⁴ See Loretta Collins, "We Shall All Heal": Ma Kilman, the Obeah Woman, as Mother-Healer in Derek Walcott's *Omeros*," *Literature and Medicine*, vol. 14, no. 1 (1995), 146-162.

the self-hate // draining from all our bodies. ... There was no difference between me and Philoctete” (245) and that they “shared the one wound, the same cure” (295). To that extent, then, Collins’s claim that Ma Kilman’s body enacts the cure seems legitimate. What follows—Ma Kilman bathing Philoctete “in the brew of the root” in an old sugar-mill cauldron—is, then, merely the closing act of the ritual intended to affirm the communal dimensions of the healing. Walcott suggests this reading when he asks, after the corolla of Philoctete’s wound has closed, “What else did it cure?” and answers that it was a cure also “for their tribal shame. / A shame for the loss of words, and a language tired // of accepting that loss” (248).

But if Ma Kilman finds the cure only after accepting and learning to speak a “meaningless” African babble that is all the more meaningful as it encodes her access to the traumatic, but liberating, past, thereby underscoring the horizon of meaning (and healing) descried by language, in what way can it be said that Major Plunkett’s “language” has, too, to dissolve itself in the “joined babble” before he is healed? For Walcott’s vision is a syncretic pan-Caribbean one, leading to the deliberate wounding of Plunkett. And when he speaks of shame and self-hate draining “from all our bodies,” he clearly includes the descendants of slave-masters, symbolised by Plunkett, among those bodies. Hence, his making Plunkett a pig-farmer because he is the rump of empire and “Empires are swinish” (21). Does Plunkett also make a symbolic return to the past? If so, to which past? Before attempting an answer, a definition of terms is called for. By language here, I obviously do not intend its sense as a formal or conventional

system of signs and symbols but, rather, as the understanding suggested by objects, actions, or conditions of associated ideas or feelings; in other words, by gesture. In this sense, then, Plunkett's unpurged imperialist mission of giving a history to the Caribbean—of historicising Helen (both as her maidservant and as St Lucia/the Caribbean)—brings him very close to viewing, just like Ma Kilman, the past of the descendants of slaves as some sort of “African babble,” or a meaningless and so irrelevant identity-shaping part of New World culture. His ambition, and the language in which it must necessarily be realised, is further tainted by his obsession with Helen, the proud and beautiful black maid that keeps house for him and his wife, Maud. “Helen of the Antilles,” as the narrative makes clear, is the colonial endearment by which the natural deep harbour Island of St. Lucia, over whose possession several European powers fought ceaseless wars, is also known. Without any sense of irony, Plunkett rationalises his lust for his maid, depicted by Walcott as the swinish master's lust for his slave, to himself thus: “Helen needed a history, / that was the pity that Plunkett felt towards her. / Not his, but her story” (30). But if it is *her*story (Caribbean history) and not *history* (a continuing narrative of the European civilising mission), that is his goal, why, then, does he envision it within a European narrative paradigm of wars of conquest over lands always figured as a female? Plunkett's obsession with Helen is so strong that she holds a transfixing power over him likened to that of Circe. As a result, at the very moment that his “book-burdened heart” ruminates on the “parallels” and “coincidences” with the Antilles in the books he is

reading in preparation for his history, Plunkett recalls the time he came into the bedroom to pick up his chequebook and

he was fixed by her glance

in the amoire's full-length mirror, where, one long arm,
its fist closed like a snake's head, slipped through a bracelet
from Maud's jewel-box, and, with eyes calm as Circe,

simply continued, and her smile said, "You will let
me try this," which he did. He stood at the Mercy
of that beaked, black arm, which with serpentine leisure

replaced the bangle. When she passed him at the door
he had closed his eyes at her closeness, a pleasure
in that passing scent which was both natural odour

and pharmacy perfume. That victory was hers,
and so was his passion; but the passionless books
did not contain smell, eyes, the long black arm, or his

knowledge that the island's beauty was in her looks,
the wild heights of its splendour and arrogance.
He moved to the coiled bracelet, rubbing his dry hands (96).

Earlier, Plunkett had remarked that it was for Helen (maid and island)
"Gaul and Briton / had mounted fort and redoubt, the ruined
barracks // with its bushy tunnel and its penile cannon" (31),
underlining the imperial longing—for sexual through discursive
domination—that drives his mission and situates it within master
narratives of colonial power. Collins drives home the point:

Plunkett conflates Helen's sexual body with the land, ready for plunder by cannons. He compares Helen's breasts to the pitons, the island mountains. By imposing the Greek myths on the Caribbean, Plunkett can only envision two cultures slaughtering each other for the sexual rights to a woman. He can only see the island as a black, sexually vulnerable, female slave. Even though Plunkett's reference to booty-seeking ancestors is ironic in view of his own inability to take Helen or the land, this is the colonizer's view of history. Early plantation owners and explorers of the New World envisioned the land as a receptive native woman ... Wounded by the loss of Empire, his participation in colonial battles, his doomed repetition of colonial relationships with Afro-Caribbean St. Lucians, Plunkett wanders through his historical documents like a lost Odysseus, tormented by the siren lure, Helen. (156)

Plunkett's imperialistic hubris, then, supplies the language of his putative history and signs more visibly his wound. Yet, it ingrains in him a doubt which, like Ma Kilman, he must resolve before his healing, for by the time he acknowledges his need for a cure he has lost his wife and is in grief. As Plunkett tours the island in preparation for his history, he comes to a mountain which he calls "La Sorcière" or "the sorceress mountain" after Ma Kilman. Plunkett betrays his arrogance in the explanation he gives of Ma Kilman's name. "They called her Ma Kilman," he says, "because the village was darkened by their belief / in her as *gardeuse*, sybil, obeah-woman / webbed with a spider's knowledge of an after-life // in her cracked lenses." Not unremarkably, it is through Plunkett we learn that Ma Kilman

sometimes took holy communion with “an old African / doubt that paused before taking the wafer’s white leaf” (58). As we have seen, Ma Kilman had to shed that doubt before the herbal cure she sought would be revealed to her. It is to this same obeah-woman, however, that Plunkett would turn for his cure. Can this be read as a “return?” I wish to hazard a yes. If the (re)turn to Africa is key to healing and the recuperation of the collective Caribbean memory; if, as Ramazani points out, Walcott turns the wound into “a resonant site of interethnic connection” (50); and if Ma Kilman, when possessed, does in fact become a vessel of the African gods⁶⁵ that reveal the secret healing herb, then there is good warrant for an affirmative answer. Besides, Plunkett’s healing comes only after he has shed his “imperial” conceit. As Ma Kilman prepares for the séance that would summon his dead wife, Plunkett can only think of how much he “hated / the smell of fuming incense and everything else,” even if the “everything else” that he hates includes “his doubt” (306). But when Ma Kilman sees Maud and tells Plunkett that his wife is “happy,” he says to himself, “Like you oracles, / so would I be.” The oracles are not only African but also represented by the very obeah-woman belief in whose power to summon the dead he had claimed “darkened” the village. But then Ma Kilman actually summons Maud, giving Plunkett the chance to beg

⁶⁵ Walcott, returning to the organic image of the tree—redolent as much of the ancient tree-gods we encounter in the opening scene as of the “tree” of healing whose seed was carried across the Atlantic by a swift—describes the African gods as sprouting through Ma Kilman’s body during her trance: “All the unburied gods, for three centuries dead, / but from whose lineage, as if her veins were their roots, // her arms ululated, uplifting the branches / of a tree carried across the Atlantic that shoots / fresh leaves as its dead trunk wallows on our beaches. // They were there. She called them. (242-43)

forgiveness of his deeply wronged wife, an act that compels him to relinquish his imperial disdain. Subsequently, Plunkett's "wound healed slowly," but heal it did nevertheless, for soon he "lost any guilt / for her absence." More remarkable, however, is the ideological change that Plunkett undergoes and its effect on his history project:

He learned how to pause
in the shade of the stone arch watching the bright red
flowers of the immortelle, he forgot the war's

history that had cost him a son and wife. He read
calmly, and he began to speak to the workmen
not as boys who worked with him, till every name

somehow sounded different; when he thought of Helen
she was not a cause or a cloud, only a name
for a local wonder. (309)

It is useful to read this passage in the light of the moment when, before Maud is summoned, Plunkett tries to send messages to her through Ma Kilman, but only succeeds in making her (Kilman) his confessor. As the narrator informs us, "That moment bound him for good to another race" (307). Quite rightly, it is Ma Kilman who has the last word on healing. Plunkett, Ma Kilman tells Seven Seas, will, like Philoctete, "heal in time," and quickly adds, "We shall all heal"—though, it must be mentioned, Walcott does not fail to remind the reader that the traumatic wound of the Caribbean is, ultimately, an "incurable / wound of time" (319) that can be assuaged enough to recover conscious agency but never fully healed. By so linking

Philoctete and Plunkett—whose two names are a feminine rhyme⁶⁶—she suggests that the language of their healing must itself be the joined babble of the wounded language that Walcott declares “carries its cure” like Philoctete’s wound (323.)

Conclusion

I would like to conclude on the note with which I began this chapter: the view that there cannot be any such thing as a free-floating wound—whether or not read as a language—never mind a historical trauma. A good place to return to the historical specificity, experiential uniqueness, and horizon of meaning of the wound in *Omeros* might be the very penultimate closing chapter to which I have just been making reference. The first two sections of that chapter mark, in a sense, the end of the narrative. The remaining section and the three sections of the last chapter are merely Walcott’s peroration, a formal closing epilogue that merely restates the theme of his epic song. Ma Kilman is the speaker of the second section of the penultimate chapter and the setting is her No Pain Café. There she brings all the major wounded characters together preparatory to the climactic statement, “We shall all heal.” Helen, over whom Achille and Hector had fought—paralleling the fought-over Helen of Troy and the Helen of the Antilles (St Lucia)—comes into the Café to buy margarine, and on leaving, we are told that “the dividing air” (of the battles for and over her, and of the ensuing

⁶⁶ I am, perhaps imprecisely, calling this a feminine rhyme because of the unstressed last syllable of each name—“-kett” and “-ctete”—but owe the insight concerning how Walcott rhymes the two names, including the other parallels he draws between them but which I have not dwelt on, to Ramazani. See *Hybrid Muse*, 64-65.

wound) “closed in her wake.” Then Ma Kilman announces that Helen is “making child.” What is significant about this otherwise trivial bit of gossip is that Walcott chooses this moment at the end of his narrative to return to the question of language by way of the weighty matter of naming. The child Helen carries apparently belongs to Hector, but with Hector dead and Helen returned to Achille, Ma Kilman shows us Helen occupying the place where she herself had been in relation to the forgotten African symbolic system before her own return to the past to retrieve the lost language and to reconcile with the native place. Achille, Ma Kilman says, wants to give the child “an African name” but Helen “don’t want no African child.” Remarkably, she would leave the question of the child’s name “till the day of christening.” In her new role, Ma Kilman is once again ancestor as, sounding like Achille’s father in Africa, she says that Helen “must learn / where she from” (318). Thus, although the argument that posits Walcott’s poetics as being beyond identitarian bounds, as lacking experiential specificity in that it does not refer outward to “the particular historical experience of a particular race in a particular part of the world” relies on the figurality of language, we have seen that same argument concede that all language is after all figural, whether spoken by Ma Kilman or by Seven Seas the oral poet. Furthermore, we saw Walcott make his European parallels pointless (312)—as he urges the reader and himself—and as it were, truly turn them into mere Greek manure for the language to match wound and word: the healing herb grows on mulch that smells like Philoctete’s wound (239-30). Even more important, I showed how Walcott, both in *Omeros* and in interviews

pre- and post-*Omeros*, disavows notions of a cosmopolitanism that thrive in an indefinite or unanchored—for which we really should read metropolitan⁶⁷—trans-national space. The strong injunction of his father to him to simplify his life to the one emblem of a sail leaving harbour and a sail coming in—that is, to always return to the islands after his travels—an injunction echoed by *Seven Seas*, the poet of folk memory within the text, stresses a powerful poetics of place that locates Walcott's vision not beyond, but squarely within, identitarian

⁶⁷ S. Radakrishnan, in his essay, "On 'Post-Colonial Discourse,'" *Callaloo* 16.4 (1993), 750-771, mounts a perceptive critique of the very influential anti-identitarian current within postcolonial literary and cultural studies, dubbed by him as "certain forms of avant-garde Eurocentric cultural theory." Among several questions that define his critique, I take the following as striking at the core of the problematic: "Is 'postcoloniality' ... a general state of being, a powerful shorthand for an intense but traveling human condition, or is it a more discrete and circumstantial experience taking place within specific geopolitical boundaries?" His answer affirms the latter proposition, believing as he does that the anti-identitarian, cosmopolitanist or hybridity-championing theorists tend, methodologically, to be obsessively focussed on a culturalist approach to their subject and to elide "postcolonial economies, histories, or politics." In other words, the very questions that should give referential specificity to any mode of representation and agency, whether literary or otherwise. Culture, Radakrishnan usefully explains, "is set up as a non-organic, freefloating ambience that frees intellectuals and theorists"—which, of course, includes writers—"from their solidarities to their regional modes of being." It is, he says, a way of sacrificing postcoloniality "as a potential politics or activism at the altar of postcoloniality as metropolitan epistemology," a product of the semantics of the prefix, "post-" that tends to read it exclusively as "beyond" in the manner that, citing Ella Shohat's well-known essay, "Notes on the Post-Colonial," apes the fascination with "posts" in the academy. Consequently, subaltern expressions of discontent with the nation or interrogations of nationalist regimes at home, which are invariably premised on the notion of a return, are not often distinguished from projects of would-be "capitalist de-territorialization of the nation-state." Obviously, I am in agreement with Radakrishnan, and have here focussed on those very strategies of anti-identitarianism that he scrutinises in specific relation to critical appraisals of Walcott. I believe that a genuine and productive transcendence of nationalism—say, for instance, a project in the Fanonian mould that both looks to but sees beyond the nation-state or nationalism—must be "differentiated from an elitist transnationalist configuration," and that metropolitan deconstructions of identity, should be "understood differently from 'indigenous divestments from nationalist identity.'" Radakrishnan thus provides a useful frame for understanding the complex poetics of place and identity that Walcott evinces in his copious primary and secondary writings pre- and post-*Omeros*. For in that complex space circumscribed by nationalist boundaries lie the crucial issue of effective representation and agency.

borders. And this, notwithstanding the undoubted paradoxical force field that constitutes postcolonial space, the antinomies of a socially complex historical condition that Wilson Harris elucidates brilliantly and that defines the work of the most fecund artistic imaginations in the postcolony. Not only Helen, but all the denizens of the New World, Walcott seems to insist, must “learn where they from.” This is the ultimate referential meaning of his quest for the language that carries the cure of the wound it inflicts. Ramazani, building on Ma Kilman’s return to Africa, says that the poets he examines in *The Hybrid Muse* reshape the question “Who am I?” as “Who were we?” and there is no reason to disagree with his observation. But, surely, the answer to that question can be found only within the identity-shaping bounds of a specific place and people, Walcott’s “habitat,” “origins,” or “native place” in the quoted lines from *Midsummer* as transposed and relived in the “unmoving” or, shall we say, identifiable, island (port) of *Omeros* to which he is bound to return after every journey.

CONCLUSION

READING POSTCOLONIAL HISTORY AS A HISTORY OF TRAUMA

Heeding Frantz Fanon's postulation in *The Wretched of the Earth* on the importance of the psychoanalytical procedure for an understanding of the (post)colonial predicament, I have in this dissertation adopted trauma as the rubric of my analysis. Given the surprising lack of specific or adequate responses to Fanon's call, despite the massive body of Fanonian criticism, especially of the text-based variety, that has flowered in the academy, I sought to intervene in this lacuna by giving the outline of what, for want of a better term, I call a psycho-social realist mode of enquiry. To this end, I claim that trauma, as a complex, even limit case, of experience refers, however indirectly, to the socio-historical events that produce it. And that, therefore, we can to varying degrees of success arrive at the meaning of trauma or what a traumatic experience attempts to say to us from the unconscious depths of the psyche with the help of a sophisticated or complex theory of reference. I say "sophisticated" or "complex" not in the self-indulgent and mesmerising mode of meta-theory but as being open to the intricacy of every social phenomenon, especially when expressed in language. Such a theory would, therefore, necessarily be conscious, even celebratory, of contradiction, paradox, ambiguity and other rhetorical tropes that complicate the sign-object relation but always with a view to historicising their origin and purposes, intended or unintended. In this light, I pursued my analysis

of the primary texts of this work within the framework of the realist theory of reference and meaning in Chapter Three. For quite remarkably, Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, Morrison's *Beloved* and Walcott's *Omeros*, exhibit across their respective modes of representation an uncanny race-wide and trans-generational consciousness of the original historical trauma. While each of these narratives recognisably evinces the trauma caused by the encounter of the black world with the enslaving and colonising European world, we are never for a second led outside the hard reality of history. We are, in short, inexorably referred to the referential locus of the trauma that plagues the characters in their lived worlds. The narratives thereby speak powerfully of "the quality of form and meaning" which, as Robert Jay Lifton reminds us, "is central to human experience"¹—especially, traumatic experience. This insight common to all three primary authors as they enact a symbolic return to the source—that is, to the primal referential locus, the Freudian scene of the catastrophic accident—informs the near-seamlessness of the narratives which it is even possible to imagine as a separately authored trilogy. At least, this is one way of justifying what I call the underlying logic of this project: that exactly in the order of this study, its argument moves from the bleak prospect of denial or repression of trauma (resulting in literal and social death), to acknowledgement (or the awakening self-consciousness and the possibility of healing) and on to the working-through of postcolonial trauma (hence the

¹ See Cathy Caruth, "An Interview with Robert Jay Lifton, in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 133.

reconstitution, or reconstruction, of identity, agency and self-determination).

In Conclusion, however, I would like to turn my thoughts to one or two areas where future work may heed Fanon's call—sites of critical-theoretical undertakings beyond the scope of this dissertation or of any single task for that matter. For a start, I would like to return to a question posed by Caruth in her reading of Freud's speculative history in *Moses and Monotheism* that seeks to explain the emergence of the Jews as a nation through the prism of trauma. In other words, the concept of history read as a trauma with the long narrative of Jewish captivity in Egypt and the exodus from bondage constituting, to Freud's mind, the transformation of the Hebrews from a people in time not confined to specific national borders into the Jews as a nation which must be defined with reference to space, a precise geographical location. Listening to Fanon, then, meant that I also listen to Caruth proposing that literary theorists read history as the history of a trauma. Doing so means that we pay attention to the dual process of forgetting/repressing the painful memories of history and grappling with the insistent return of those same memories to haunt the present and define the future. This is the constant theme discussed from varying angles in my three primary texts. Caruth enjoins the history-as-trauma approach, very much like Fanon,² then, in the belief that this is the central issue investigated by Freud in *Moses and*

² This, of course, is my reading. Caruth does not once mention Fanon or (post)colonial history in the work under reference, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History*, being concerned with the field of trauma studies as it has emerged from intellectual interrogations of the Jewish holocaust as well as the general uses for literary criticism and theory that this field presents.

Monotheism. As already pointed, however, no less a postcolonial subject than Edward Glissant makes a similar call when he urges a reconsideration of our lived history “as a steadily advancing neurosis.” For the ensuing result of imperial subjugation was nothing short of trauma, a steadily advancing neurosis. To restate it once more, slavery and colonialism shattered the world of the colonised. The utter chaos, the sense of being unmoored and cast adrift from any frame of reference, from a meaning-making epistemological order, is precisely what Caruth urges theorists of literature and culture to take seriously by her reformulation of Freud, so that it is not mere speculation to say that the “accident”—in the Freudian sense of the catastrophic historical event—of colonial intrusion not only registered the cataclysmic blow to the psyche of the colonised but also denotes its very incomprehensibility even now in the so-called *post-colonial* epoch. In this sense, the latency period which I discussed in Chapters Two and Three can be likened to the persisting zone of occult instability of which Fanon speaks. In this way, we can link the structure of incomprehensibility in the wake of colonialism to the effects of the trauma it induced and still induces. Call that traumatic history the nightmare of colonialism from which, as James Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus tells his English headteacher, appropriately enough, he is “trying to awake.”³ Or call it the trance, the half-conscious state in which volition is literally suspended, the dazed or bewildered condition, indeed the passage from life to death,⁴ from which Soyinka’s

³ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 34.

⁴ I refer, of course, to the several dictionary senses of the word trance.

Elesin in *Death and the King's Horseman* does not awaken, having failed to comprehend the extent to which his will has been determined by colonialism. It is a similar latency in understanding, a comparable incomprehensibility together with an attendant attenuation of effective agency, as I pointed out in Chapter One, that Okonkwo bewails to Obierika in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* thus: "What is it that has happened to our people? Why have they lost the power to fight?"

For my purposes here, a rephrasing of the question would be something like this: What are the specific symptoms or manifestations of (post)colonial trauma today? And why have we lost—well, not shown—the theoretical will to uncover and subject them to (critical) analysis? This is a dissertation, and lest I be accused of merely trying to "talk up" my project, so to speak, let me quickly appeal to the authority of Hortense Spillers who in a well-cited essay has also identified this gap in black intellectual thought. I will quote her at some length:

[C]ulture theorists on either side of the question would rule out ... any meeting ground between race matters, on the one hand, and psychoanalytic theories, on the other. But I want to shift ground, mindful of this caveat: little or nothing in the intellectual history of African-Americans within the social and political context of the United States would suggest the effectiveness of a psychoanalytic discourse, revised or classical, in illuminating the problematic of "race" on an intersubjective field of play, nor do we yet know how to historicize the psychoanalytic object and objective, invade its hereditary premises and insulations, and open its insights, subsequently, to cultural and social forms that are disjunctive to

its originary imperatives. In short, how might psychoanalytic theories speak about “race” as a self-consciously assertive reflexivity, and how might “race” expose the gaps that psychoanalytic theories awaken? Neither from the point of view of African-Americans’ relationship to the dominant culture nor, just as important, from that of the community’s *intramural* engagements have we been obliged in our analytical/critical writings to consider the place, for example, of fantasy, desire, and the “unconscious,” of conflict, envy, aggression, and ambivalence in the repertoire of elements that are perceived to fashion the lifeworld. ... I think it is safe to say, however, that the psychoanalytic object, subject, subjectivity now constitute the missing layer of hermeneutic/interpretive projects of an entire generation of black intellectuals now at work. The absence is not only glaring but perhaps most curious in its persistence.⁵

Spillers writes with particular reference to African-American intellectual production but has in mind all of the “black intellectuals now at work.” Which is no surprise, given her obvious echoing of Fanon whom she says “offers our clearest link to psychoanalysis in the African/Third World field,”⁶ not to mention her copious reference to him in this essay as in several of the others in *Black, White, and in Color*. Spillers does not set out to do a “sustained reading” of this problem, neither have I in this dissertation. For the truth is that much

⁵ Hortense J. Spillers, “All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was your Mother’: Psychoanalysis and Race,” in her *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 376-77; original emphasis.

⁶ Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*, 386.

of the groundwork for that kind of work belongs to the clinical or practising psychoanalyst. Unfortunately, only Fanon has ventured to offer anything in that regard in his case studies documented in “Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders,” the closing chapter of *The Wretched*. Until the clinicians appear on the horizon to update or supplement Fanon, however, we must continue to do the best we can with what he bequeathed to us in his revisionary dialogue with psychoanalysis as a theory. Happily for the postcolonial critic willing to try, trauma studies have come to broaden the scope of reference, adding a comparativist lens to the camera.

Yet, to attempt an answer to the first of my two questions above—“What are the specific symptoms or manifestations of the (post)colonial trauma today?”—we need not look beyond Fanon. There is enough in the Fanonian oeuvre to help us illuminate some of the hardest problems that define the postcolonial condition. We should always be reminded of what Diana Fuss points out—that Fanon’s conscious decision to locate his theory of radical decolonisation at the intersection of anti-imperialism and psychoanalysis gave him “a vocabulary and an intellectual framework in which to diagnose and treat not only the psychological disorders produced in individuals by the violence of colonial domination but also the neurotic structure of [post]colonialism itself.”⁷ One such neurosis—a problem of gargantuan proportions now, in fact, with a prominent role in perpetrating the notion of postcolonial pessimism—is that of official corruption. How

⁷ Diana Fuss, “Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification,” 20. My square brackets.

can Fanon help us understand this problem outside the language of moralists, political outrage, development studies and the wails of the oppressed? In other words, in a vocabulary that seeks to understand its non-materialist dimensions by probing the role of “fantasy, desire, and the ‘unconscious,’ of conflict, envy, aggression, and ambivalence” in its rise and current career? The “disintegrative” and arguably more harmful mode of corruption, critics point out, is characterised by exclusivity. Most people “are likely to be closed out and will not possess the table stakes needed to buy into the crisis corruption game,” Michael Johnston tells us in the essay, “The Political Consequences of Corruption: A Reassessment.” Moreover, the lines of exclusion often follow the existing divisions in society. Thus, Johnston adds, “[t]he more the boundaries of a disintegrative form of corruption correspond with existing class, racial, ethnic, and factional cleavages in society, the more pervasive its political effects will be.” Johnston goes on to conclude that “where this correspondence is close, corruption is likely to become yet another issue in intergroup conflict, perhaps serving as the ‘justification’ for reprisals or coups.”⁸ A cursory survey of many a postcolonial society—and I will name one in a moment—will confirm this finding. It is true, as Johnston is careful enough to point out, that corruption alone would rarely lead to the collapse of a complex political system, such as a nation,⁹ it being just

⁸ See Michael Johnston, “The Political Consequences of Corruption: A Reassessment,” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (July, 1986), 459-477, at 475.

⁹ Johnston’s phrasing, in a slightly different context—that of the functionality of corruption, seen as value-free, neither a positive nor a negative term—is as follows: “In any event, whole systems will rarely stand or fall because of corruption alone” (462).

“another issue” that leads to dysfunctionality—or as is increasingly evident, a failed or failing nation-state. Yet to the extent that corruption, when significant, constitutes an alternative regime of exchange to “other processes of influence and allocation,” a regime, that is to say, “different ... from what would otherwise have been observed,” it is useful to “discuss its role as a process operating within that system *as altered by corruption*.”¹⁰ Put another way, as an already warped nation-state political system seriously altered (“aggravated” would be a better word) by corruption.

The moral view from Nigeria, expressed by the Catholic Church as recently as 2009, virtually corroborates the academic one by Johnston. The church began the “Our Search for Nationhood” section of its communiqué issued at the end of a plenary meeting by noting that in Nigeria “the journey to nationhood is still long,” that “We are yet to build a nation where people dwell in security” and that “Life and property are constantly exposed to danger.” The church pointed to several causes: the Niger Delta crisis,¹¹ religious conflicts in the north,

¹⁰ Michael Johnston, “The Political Consequences of Corruption,” p. 463; original emphasis.

¹¹ This refers to the struggle of the minority ethnic groups of the Niger Delta—where all of Nigeria’s oil and gas resources are located—for an equitable federal system and control, to a fair degree, of the hydrocarbon wealth in their land, as well as for environment-friendly oil extracting methods by the multinational cartels, among them Shell, ChevronTexaco and Agip. The struggles of the Niger Delta peoples began in earnest in 1993 and are known to the world mostly through the activities of the Ogoni people and their Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), as led by the late Ken Saro-Wiwa. Due to the immense success of MOSOP in mobilising local and international support for their cause, even leading to the cessation of all operations in Ogoniland by Shell, Saro-Wiwa was murdered along with eight of his comrades in 1995 after a show trial by a military tribunal set up by the late dictator, General Sani Abacha. The world-wide outrage that greeted this “judicial lynching”—to say nothing of the critical role oil plays in the global scheme of things—turned the attention of the world which had hitherto been indifferent to the goings-on in the Niger Delta.

and ethnic conflicts in different parts of the country. As a sign of how seriously it took the question of corruption, the church treated it separately. "Corruption," it said, "and theft of public funds, which have largely remained unabated despite our call for prayers, have brought our country to its knees. This is noticeable, for example, in the collapse of infrastructure in the land, in the lack of basic amenities, and in the increasing number of unemployed, in the ever-rising crime wave." Then commenting on all the factors militating against nation-building, with again a special mention of corruption, the Catholic Church said as follows:

We regret lost opportunities for nation building in Nigeria. We are saddened by the recent riots in the cities of Jos and Bauchi,¹² despite our emphasis on dialogue as veritable means of resolving crisis. Each time we witness ethnic and religious conflicts, each time we hold elections lacking in credibility, we lose opportunities to build a nation. Each time the people of our richly endowed land are impoverished through acts of violation of fundamental human rights, each time we make or fall victims

¹² Sporadic ethnic conflicts, often with political tensions as their underlying cause, have been a regular occurrence in the Northern half of the country since the early 1980s. With specific reference to Jos and Bauchi which the Catholic communiqué cites, there have been several catastrophic riots in either city since 2001, attributed to simmering religious/ethnic conflicts, all of which were widely reported by the local and international media, as follows: September 2001, November 2008, January and March 2010 in Jos; February and July 2009 and December 2009 in Bauchi. The orgy of religion-based riots would seem to have begun in earnest with the Maitatsine massacres of Kano in 1980, followed by other sect-led riots in Kaduna and Maiduguri in 1982 and Yola in 1984.

of injustice, bribery and corruption, we lose opportunities to build a nation.¹³

We have seen how colonialism constitutes a traumatic event. No doubt violent coups, bloody religious riots, inter-ethnic conflicts that may lead to genocide (Rwanda), so-called rebel wars which exact incalculable costs in lives, bodily harm and mental suffering (Sierra Leone, Liberia, Sudan, etc.) also constitute traumatic events. If corruption, which, as Johnston and the Nigerian Catholic Church inform us, can have its own catastrophic effects, would it be right to subject it to psychoanalytic scrutiny? Indeed, corruption may not be a classical psychoanalytical category, and we cannot really find any direct illumination of its own murky processes from psychoanalysis or trauma studies, yet the sheer magnitude of it in a postcolonial space like Nigeria has led to reactions that suggest it is one discursive space where we ought to go in search of a fuller account of the phenomenon by focussing on its psychic life. Or, at any rate, plot our way to it analytically as a secondary effect of trauma. Take this report in a Nigerian newspaper on the astonishing—though ordinary as the average Nigerian would readily endorse the view—suggestion by the current chair of Nigeria’s anti-corruption outfit; it bears quoting in full:

The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), has advocated psychiatric tests for public office aspirants, ahead of the 2011 general elections. Chairman of the EFCC, Mrs.

¹³ All references to the online version of the communiqué at <http://www.abujacatholicliaison.org/speeches/The%20Word%20of%20God%20and%20the%20Building%20of%20the%20Nigerian%20Nation.pdf>.

Farida Waziri, made the call yesterday while delivering a keynote address at a workshop on transparency and accountability in the public service.

She said: “Having dealt with many corruption cases, I am inclined to suggest that public officers should be subjected to some form of psychiatric evaluation to determine their suitability for public office.

“The extent of aggrandizement and gluttonous accumulation of wealth that I have observed suggest to me that some people are mentally and psychologically unsuitable for public office. We have observed people amassing public wealth to a point suggesting ‘madness’ or some form of obsessive-compulsive psychiatric disorder.”¹⁴

Farida might as well have been echoing Fanon: “only a psychoanalytical interpretation of the black problem can lay bare the anomalies of affect that are responsible for the structure of the complex”—in this case, the corruption complex. So how might we even begin such interpretation where, as has been noted, corruption falls outside the gaze of psychoanalysis? One approach, I hazard, is to pursue trans-contextual readings of insights developed in relation to other problems of the colonised. For instance, when Fanon says “The colonized man is an envious man,” does that not promise something beyond the dialectics and poetics of colonial violence he propounds in *The Wretched of the Earth*? We have seen the use Barbara Goff and

¹⁴ See, “EFCC Wants Psychiatric Tests for Politicians,” *Daily Champion*, 29 September 2009. Ironically, Farida herself is constantly dogged by reports of her corrupt enrichment by the very same lucre-crazed people she wants psychoanalysed, though nothing has been formally proved against her.

Michael Simpson make of the passage containing this phrase in their *Crossroads in the Black Aegean: Oedipus, Antigone, and Dramas of the African Diaspora*. For the last time here, let us revisit that famous passage:

The look that the native turns on the settler's town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses his dreams of possession—all manner of possession: to sit at the settler's table, to sleep with his wife if possible. The colonized man is an envious man. And this the settler knows very well; when their glances meet he ascertains bitterly, always on the defensive, "They want to take our place." It is true, for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler's place.¹⁵

We have here several of the key concepts that constitute the psychoanalytic field of vision: lust, desire, fantasy, aggression, the unconscious (dream) and ambivalence. To be well on our way to making bricks with mere straw, let us think of corruption as the non-violent means by which the colonised dreams of taking the place of the colonizer. For if the coloniser symbolised not only political power but also an easy and lavish lifestyle complete with the choicest colonial real estate, cars, leisure and recreation together with a retinue of domestic servants—even where, and perhaps because, this lifestyle was sponsored by mindless exploitation and vaulted the colonial to a class or social status unavailable to him back in his native Europe¹⁶—

¹⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 39.

¹⁶ In the scene where the girls, the market-women's daughters, mimic a conversation among colonial officers, Soyinka gives us an idea of the opulence, replete with golf

the dream of possession, “all manner of possession’ that Fanon speaks of is not extinguished by the mere possession of the coloniser’s wife. At any rate, not after nominal independence and the departure of the coloniser. By crook or hook, those who had finally taken the place of the departed colonial masters had to acquire and sustain the lifestyle associated with power and governance in a modern nation-state such as has been handed to them. And the association in their mind of the two—power and an ostentatious lifestyle—under colonialism persists after “independence” or “liberation.” What Waziri calls madness, a psychiatric disorder, is to the corrupt, kleptomaniac, suzerains of the post-colonial nation-state, an inherent and necessary part of the exercise of power. It comes with the territory, so to speak! Re-reading Fanon this way by bringing him “up to date” and applying the uncanny insights of psychoanalysis to the mental processes of the postcolonial subject today, it seems to me we would have far more to gain than lose.

A clear omission from this project and a site of future work is what may be called, echoing Spillers, Psychoanalysis and the Post-Colonial Nation-State. Benedict Anderson’s brilliant conceptualisation of nations as “imagined communities” promises much to the critic armed with the psychoanalytic lens. And here we would be on firmer psychoanalytic grounds, especially if we pursue the insight provided by the notion of birth as a trauma. We have seen the boon of the inverse view—death as a trauma—and it seems to me that the notion

and race courses usually maintained by Europeans Only clubs, from which these lowly officers would normally be excluded back in England. See *Death and the King’s Horseman*, 31.

of birth trauma speaks directly to the emergence of the postcolonial nation. If the birth of the postcolonial nation was a traumatic event, not only in the sense of the violence of the anti-colonial struggles but also of the forceful cobbling together of hitherto independent, autochthonous nation-peoples under radically drawn and redrawn maps, but which the urgent needs of decolonisation constrained the leaders of the anti-colonial struggle to adopt as the given nation, then it is time we began a discussion of the post-colonial nation-state as perhaps only a transferential space for working-through the lingering colonial trauma that haunts it. This would be the best way to view the “phenomenon” of national conferences proposed as the panacea to the intractable crises that plagued many African countries in the eighties, a phenomenon that swept through Francophone Africa more particularly.¹⁷ A sovereign national conference, offered as way of gathering the tribes for the purpose of freely determining the terms of union of the “mere geographical expression”¹⁸ often called post-colonial nation-state, has been a major demand of the left in Nigeria since 1989. For that matter, the notion of truth and reconciliation commissions, a means South Africa sought to overcome the trauma and bitterness of the apartheid epoch, fits into this concept of the postcolonial-nation-as-transferential-space. Simply put, treating the

¹⁷ Pearl T. Robinson discusses this phenomenon in the eponymously-titled article, “The Phenomenon of National Conferences in Francophone Africa,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (July, 1994), 575-610.

¹⁸ Chief Obafemi Awolowo, one of the founding fathers of Nigeria—a name or nation that did not exist before the forceful merger by Lord Alfred Lugard of the existing ethnic nationalities, generally grouped under the Northern and Southern protectorates of the British empire, in 1914 —famously described the country he and others fought to free from colonial domination in these words. See his *Path to Nigerian Freedom* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947).

post-colonial nation-state as offering no more than a transference site is to say that it presents us an open clinic and many couches for Freud's "talking cure." The dynamism of this space and its transformative potential are addressed by Spillers who likens it to the "clearing" Toni Morrison gives Sethe when she is denied a pulpit—even though a regular and proper pulpit would do as well in certain circumstances.¹⁹ Evidently, we need Fanon today more than ever and he is amenable to far more than just the self-regarding needs of global theory.

¹⁹ Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 399. See the elaboration of her use of this concept with specific regard to African-American communities in the second paragraph of footnote 39 at 522.

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